

Harry Potter: The Un-Champion

Harry was really peeved as he waited for Mr. Weasley to come get him so he could go join the Weasleys for the rest of the summer. That choice of words caused a smile to come to him. He wondered if the reason the poltergeist at school was the way he was, was because he had been peeved so many times that he had finally gone over the edge. Harry could not remember any time Peeves had been serious about anything; he was always quite "mad".

He heaved a big sigh. Just a few more minutes and then he should be able to leave this forsaken house and his so-called relatives. What was really irksome, and had been weighing on his mind, was that he really should not even be here. He now knew he had a live, honest-to-goodness, godfather -- someone who cared for him and wanted Harry to live with him. Yet, even though he was now fourteen, he was not allowed to decide where he was to live. For some reason that Harry did not understand, he had to follow the Headmaster's wishes in this, as if the Headmaster were Harry's guardian, which he did not think the old wizard was.

Harry was sure Albus Dumbledore did want Harry around, but he was not sure why the Headmaster did, or why he got special treatment sometimes. Harry knew of a couple of other orphans at school, such as Neville Longbottom (he did have his Gran so it was not quite the same, Harry mentally acknowledged), but the same rules did not seem to apply to Neville and the others. This really chafed Harry, although he could not quite put his finger on why. Still, the Slytherin side of him wondered if he could use this situation to his advantage somehow.

Suddenly, a loud noise came from the living room. Running in there, Harry saw Mr. Weasley come out of the previously-boarded-up fireplace. When the red-haired man looked up, he said, "Hello, Harry. I hope no one minds that we got the Dursley's fireplace hooked up to the Floo network temporarily, but this did seem like the best way to get to you without too many people being the wiser." Harry grinned as he shook the man's hand.

The next few minutes of conversation between Arthur Weasley and Vernon Dursley amused Harry greatly. The prank the twins pulled on his baby elephant-sized cousin was pretty good, too. Perhaps he could learn a lesson here, Harry mused as he dragged his trunk to the fireplace to head to the Weasleys. If he could not have everything his way, perhaps he should try for as many things as he could, stop caring about the stupid stuff, and just have fun the rest of the time. Life would sure be less stressful that way. With that mindset, he Flooed to his best friend's house and a World Cup Quidditch game in a few days.

"The champion for Hogwarts will be -- Cedric Diggory!" the Headmaster announced. Harry applauded the Hufflepuff with the rest of the school. He thought it was pretty nice for the Puffs to get some recognition and Cedric seemed like a nice enough person, from what little Harry knew about the seventh year. After all, Cedric was a Seeker, so he could not be too bad. He unconsciously did not think about Malfoy, who tried to play Seeker too.

As Harry was thinking about that, the Goblet of Fire started changing colors and belched out a fourth slip of paper, which the Headmaster caught with ease, though a worried face had followed the paper's flight. "Harry Potter."

Harry could hardly believe what he was hearing. In fact, he was hardly even aware that Hermione had helped him out of his seat and had pushed him to the front of the room, where the Headmaster had continued his trek with a push towards the trophy room. The unbelievable situation continued as everyone tried to figure out how his name had gotten into the Goblet of Fire.

"Are you sure you did not find some way to put your name in, Harry?" Dumbledore asked for the third time.

"Yes, Headmaster, very sure." Then an idea came to him. "Professor, may I see the paper with my name on it?" He was handed the paper. He sighed as he looked at it. While there was no school listed, the name there was his and appeared to be his handwriting. Looking closer, he noticed that the left and bottom edges were not as straight

as the top and right edges. "This does look like my writing, but I did not write this for the Goblet..."

"Oh please, Potter, save your pathetic excuses," Snape sneered. "If it's your writing, you put it in there."

"No, I didn't!"

"Mr. Potter, control yourself," McGonagall snapped. After a few seconds for him to calm down, she asked, "Now, why do you think it was not your entry if it's in your handwriting? And where would it have come from since the Goblet will not accept forgeries?"

"Because, if you look at it, you'll see my name is on one line," Harry started explaining. "I would have written my name on two lines and my school on the third line. Actually, this looks more like what I'd put at the top of one of my tests or an essay, some of which I never get back."

"As interesting as that may be," Ludo Bagman spoke up, "you are now in the Tournament as it's a legally binding magical contract."

"How can it be a binding contract when I did not willingly enter?"

"Your name on the paper in your own hand indicates your willingness," Dumbledore told him with what sounded like a tired voice. "I'm sorry, Harry, but you will have to participate in the Tournament."

Bagman brightened. "Well, now that that's settled, I'll tell you that the first task is on the 24th of November. It will test your bravery and courage. It will also test your ingenuity as you won't find out what it is until that morning."

A few minutes later, everyone was leaving and Harry headed back towards the Gryffindor Tower. Cedric was walking that way too. "I have to participate he says," Harry darkly muttered to himself.

Cedric stopped when they got to the point where their paths split. "Harry? Just between us, did you put your name in the Goblet?"

Harry wanted to scream, but he caught himself. It occurred to him that Cedric thought that maybe Harry would not say the same thing if the adults were not around. He was not sure if that bothered him more, as Cedric thought he had been lying, or if that helped because Cedric recognized that it was sometimes the students versus the teachers. "No, I did not put my name in; I promise, I'm not lying about this. I'm sorry you're not getting all the recognition you deserve for being picked and I hope you win Cedric." An idea suddenly came to him. With a smile he added, "In fact, I think I know how I can help you win. Good-night, Cedric."

The Hufflepuff turned and went towards his dorm, contemplating the conversation, not only in the Trophy Room but the one he just had alone with Harry. As strange as it might sound, he almost believed Harry.

Harry continued to mutter on his way up to the Tower. "I have to participate, my arse. I'll show them participation." Reaching the Fat Lady's portrait, he spoke the password. As it opened, a wall of sound blasted him. He was quickly pulled into the Common Room and the ongoing party. Everyone was trying to congratulate him and no one seemed willing to listen to him when he denied entering himself.

Fed up with all the nonsense, he pulled away from everyone and pushed his way to the stairs to the boys' dorms. Pulling out his wand, he cast *Sonorous* on himself. "My I have your attention, please!" Everyone quieted down and looked at him. "Thank you. I'm glad everyone is having a good time, but I want everyone to know that I did not, I repeat, I did not enter myself. I have no idea how my name got into the Goblet of Fire. I should not be in the Tournament; therefore, I'm asking everyone to support Cedric as you would me. Now, for those who want to, carry on with your party. *Quietus*." Murmurs filled the room behind him as he went up the stairs to his dorm room.

In his room, he saw that Ron was the only one in there. He was still fully dressed while lying on his bed. "You really didn't enter your name?" Ron looked really confused, like he wanted to be angry, but a wrench had just be thrown into his mental gears.

"Did you hear what I just told everyone downstairs?" Ron nodded. "It's the same answer to you mate, because it's the truth. Moody thinks someone entered my name to get me killed; I'm inclined to agree with him. So I'm not going to do anything."

"What?"

"I'm not going to do anything. I'm not supposed to be in the Tournament. They say I'll have to participate, but they did not say to what level. So I'll do the minimum required and make sure I survive."

"But, but, but you're good Harry. You could win."

Harry laughed. "No bloody way. I'm only a fourth year. But I'll tell you what Ron, if you think it's that cool, that you could survive whatever they throw at you, have Hermione start brewing Polyjuice and you can take my place. If you live and manage to beat three seventh year students, the thousand Galleons is all yours, along with any fame you'll get. At the end of the third task, you can hold the trophy up and let the Polyjuice wear off and I swear I'll say you did all the work and are the real champion." He could see Ron seriously thinking that through. "Remember Ron, that's only if you live and Hermione said it's not uncommon for participants to die in the Tournament."

Ron looked shocked, apparently he had not listened as closely to their knowledgeable friend as Harry had.

With a grin, Harry finished getting ready for bed. "Good-night, Ron." No answer came back for anything Harry had said. Harry found that amusing.

The rest of the week was not the best in Harry's life. Most people seemed to think Harry had put his name in the Goblet. Despite his speech, a few Gryffindors looked badly at Harry, as did most of the Hufflepuffs and the Ravenclaws. The Slytherins were one hundred percent against him.

The biggest incident of the week came as Potions class was about to start on Friday. That was when Malfoy and all of his "friends" showed

off their buttons that alternately showed "SUPPORT CEDRIC DIGGORY" and "POTTER STINKS!"

"Is that all your little mind can come up with, Malfoy? I thought purebloods were supposed to be superior, but your vocabulary leaves a lot to be desired," Harry told the Slytherin. He could see Malfoy's hand inching towards his wand.

"Well at least I'm not a berk trying to steal someone else's glory."

At that, Harry pulled his wand and the two of them launched a spell. As luck would have it, the spells collided and ricocheted off of one another. Harry's hit Goyle, who had a fungus start growing on him; while Malfoy's hit Hermione, who's front teeth started growing. Harry's "luck" continued, as that was when Snape walked up.

"What's going on here?"

"Potter tried to hex me, sir. I managed to get a shield up in time," Malfoy smoothly said before Harry could even open his mouth.

For reasons only the Potions master knew, he ignored the evidence of two offensive spells. "No lasting harm done, but ten points from Gryffindor and detention for you Potter for fighting. Everyone into class."

"But what about Hermione? She's been harmed," Ron angrily spoke up.

"Ten more points from Gryffindor and detention for you too Weasley." He looked at Hermione, who now had teeth that were longer than her chin, though she tried to cover them with her hand. "Besides, I see nothing wrong with Granger. Goyle, go up to the hospital wing to be healed and hurry back to class." He turned and strode into the classroom.

"Git!" Ron hissed under his breath. "Hermione, go see Madam Pomfrey. Harry and I will take notes for you." She nodded and left, her front two teeth now down to the bottom of her neck. "Harry?" he said quietly before they went in. "I know I haven't given you as hard a

time about all this like some have, but I haven't been the best friend I could have either. I'm sorry about that. I believe you didn't put your name in."

Harry smiled. "Thanks, Ron. It helps to have my best mate believe in me."

Snape started his lecture. "Today we will discuss poisons and their antidotes. For our lab today, you will brew an antidote and then we'll test them on someone at the end of class." The professor had been looking at Harry the whole time, so the boy knew what was coming.

After a short lecture that only listed the types of poisons, just like in the book, they started on their lab. Harry and Ron had just barely started when Colin Creevey came in. "Professor? The Headmaster needs Harry Potter for the rest of the morning." Snape sneered and waved them both off.

"Thanks, Colin," Harry told the younger boy when they were out of the classroom. "You have just saved me from certain death."

Colin laughed. "No problem, Harry."

"Do you know what the Headmaster wants me for?"

"It's for the tournament: pictures and the wand-weighting."

Harry rolled his eyes. Great, just what he needed -- not!

Back in the Trophy Room, Harry saw the rest of the champions and Mr. Ollivander. None of the judges were to be found, though there were two other people. One had a camera and the other was a woman with big glasses covered with cheap-looking jewels.

"Harry Potter!" she simpered and glided up to him. "Just the person I was looking for. I'm Rita Skeeter, reporter for the Daily Prophet. How about you and I have a friendly chat while we all wait." She grabbed his arm to try to pull him towards a closet, but Harry dug his heels in and resisted her.

"No, thank you. I'm just fine where I am."

"Well, I suppose we can talk here too. So Harry, tell me how you feel about being in the Tournament?"

"I'm not happy about it because I'm not supposed to be in it."

"How could you not be happy? This is everyone's dream."

"Because I'm not supposed to be in it and I'm hurting Cedric's dream. I don't like that." Cedric's head snapped up to look Harry in the eyes; the other two looked at him strangely.

"Hmm, so how did you enter the Tournament, Harry?"

"I didn't. No one knows how my name got in the Goblet of Fire."

"But you're here now and one of the youngest to ever compete. How do you feel about competing against the older students?"

"I don't know; they'll have an advantage, obviously."

"Yes," her eyes seem to grow behind her bejeweled eyeglasses. "Yes, you could even face death. How do you feel about death? Do you ever cry about your dead parents?"

Whatever he was going to say, and Harry did not know himself, was prevented by all the judges walking into the room. Thankful for the reprieve, Harry walked away from the reporter.

The wand-weighing and pictures did take up the rest of the morning. As much as he hated it, he was glad not to be in Snape's class. That got him to thinking, as did the comment from Fleur that she needed to hurry to lunch so she could get to class back in the carriage. A very thoughtful Harry Potter slowly walked to lunch.

Other than relaying what had happened to him, and congratulating Hermione on her pretty smile now that she had been healed, Harry had been fairly quiet during lunch. He had been working on his thoughts of the morning and thoughts from the summer, about how

he was treated. That made him wonder how much he could push things here; how much he could push things for the better. When he saw Madame Maxime leave the head table for the front door, and to her carriage he supposed, he excused himself from his friends and hurried after her. He only had free periods and History of Magic for the afternoon, so as far as he was concerned, he could do anything else he wanted for the next five hours until dinner.

Harry caught up with the Headmistress halfway between the front door to the castle and her carriage. "Madame Maxime?" he called out. "May I talk with you for about ten minutes or so?"

The very tall woman turned and looked at him. "Mr. Potter? What is the nature of the business you wish to discuss?"

"I'd like to ask if you take transfer students."

Olympe Maxime smiled ever so slightly. While she and Albus Dumbledore got along reasonably well, there were times he annoyed her with his grandfatherly know-it-all attitude. "We do allow transfer students from qualified schools, Hogwarts being one of them."

"Do you also have Quidditch teams?"

"Of course, Mr. Potter. We also have four teams which play in an intra-school competition."

"Excellent! Then I have only one more question."

"By all means, Mr. Potter." She opened the door to her school's carriage. "Please come in and we can discuss all of this in my office." Harry Potter would be quite the recruiting coup.

Harry Potter walked back into the castle. He was only a little late for dinner, but that was all right with him. He had a new look on life, especially life at school. He was also starting to look at his overall life differently. There was something about his having to stay at his aunt's house, the way he was treated differently, and all the bad things that kept happening here at school that seemed to be interconnected. Alas, he had yet to figure out what they all had in common, other than

Professor Dumbledore. That suddenly made him wonder if the Headmaster knew more than he had told Harry.

In the Great Hall, he took a seat next to Ron and across from Hermione. She practically pounced on him, at least verbally. "Where have you been this afternoon? You missed History of Magic."

With a carefree attitude, he started dishing food for himself. "I've been talking to a couple of professors all afternoon, and doing a little thinking."

"What about?" Ron asked him as he filled his mouth.

"Classes, life, the past, the future, ah, you know, stuff." He also poured himself some pumpkin juice.

"And that was so important you had to skive class? It couldn't wait until this evening or tomorrow?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. "It seemed like a good idea at the time; in fact, it still seems like it was time well spent. I also spent a little time in the library doing a little bit of research. All in all, I had a very profitable afternoon. How about you?"

"You're not going to tell us, are you?" Hermione continued with her interrogation.

He smiled at his two friends. "Not this second, but soon."

"Speaking of soon, mate, you better hurry up with dinner. We've got detention with Snape in about fifteen minutes," Ron reminded him.

Harry did not change his eating speed. "That's one of the things I gave thought to this afternoon. I'm not going."

"What?!" Ron almost shouted.

"Ssh, you're drawing attention to us," Harry pointed out. Indeed, most of the Gryffindors, a number of Ravenclaws, and even a few

Hufflepuffs along with a few teachers at the head table were now looking their way.

The three stayed silent for a few minutes to let the scrutiny pass. "Harry, you can't just skip detention because you feel like it," Hermione informed him. "Do you realize how much trouble you can get in for that? You might even be expelled."

Having finished dinner, Harry grabbed a large slice of apple pie. "Normally, I would agree with you, but not in this case."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Harry, there is no case you won't be in trouble for this. You have to go, no matter how much you don't like Professor Snape."

"So why aren't you going?" Ron asked.

Harry almost answered, but stopped himself. Instead, he asked, "Have either of you ever felt like Snape could read your mind? You know, something happened and you were thinking about it in a way that wasn't obvious, and he asked you about the very thing that was on your mind?"

"Yes," Hermione answered and Ron nodded, "but what does that have to do with all this?"

"I'll answer your questions later tonight, but not before you leave for detention, Ron."

"But Harry," Hermione objected, "in the end, what's the difference? If Professor Snape can really read our thoughts, whether he finds out tonight or next week doesn't really matter."

"In the long run, you are correct. But in the short run, I'm protecting Ron. So, Ron, if Snape asks you where I am, tell him you don't know because I decided not to come."

"Are you daft? I can't tell him that," Ron hissed, trying to keep his voice low.

"Tell him whatever you want, Ron. Lay all the blame on me so you don't get into trouble, but I'm not going." Harry turned to his other friend. "Hermione? Is there a branch of magic that deals with reading other's minds and defending yourself from that?"

"Yes. I can't remember what it's called, but I remember reading about it in my book *An Overview of the Magical World*. Why?"

"Because, I think I need to know. Can I borrow your book to find out what it is?" Harry queried.

"Sure, I'll get it for you when we get back. It's not a very big book, so that should be easy to find." Hermione got up as she was done.

Ron got up too. "I can't believe you're leaving me hanging like this, Harry."

Harry shrugged slightly. "I'm not trying to hurt you. Like I said, tell him I decided not to come. You can even say you tried to get me to come but I ignored you, if you like. It will only happen this once, and I'll tell you why when you get back to the Tower." Ron nodded and left.

Harry followed Hermione to the Tower. She went up to her room and came back down a few minutes later. She handed the thin book to him with it open. On the right hand page, Harry saw two sections, one about Legilimency and one about Occlumency. After reading the overview of them, he decided that Occlumency was what he needed. The book was helpful and gave a couple of recommendations for further reading on the subject.

Looking at his brunette friend who was reading her *History of Magic* book, he said, "I'll be back in a little bit with your book." He left the Common Room, perusing the book for other interesting things while he walked to the library. In the library, it took him about half an hour to determine there were no books on Legilimency. It did not take long for him to reason out that the staff did not want the students to learn that subject. He'd probably have to mail order a book about that. Another half hour of searching led him to three books on Occlumency. He was amused to see that Sirius Black had been the last person to check them all out. With a laugh to himself, Harry guessed that they

had been for group study. He would have to ask his godfather about them over the holidays.

Madam Pince gave him a funny look, but she checked them out to Harry anyway. He started reading the introductory book as he slowly walked back to the Tower. It seemed you could protect your mind in several different ways; which you used depended on your skill and the attack. He could think about one thing to the exclusion of everything else, like a candle flame, a lake, the night sky, whatever. He could also try to build a wall and try to just keep the attacker out. It said he could also try to divert the attacker to a safe or even false memory. That list was in order of difficulty, so he decided to start with the first. It also talked about clearing your mind, which also helped in controlling emotions. The book gave a few exercises for that too. By the time he reached the Tower, he thought he had a handle on the basic theory, so he just needed to start practicing.

Walking in through the portrait hole, he saw his head of house quietly talking to Hermione. The older woman turned, and as soon as she saw him, a scowl appeared on her face. "Mr. Potter," she said so sternly he almost got the chills, "Professor Snape says you purposefully did not show up for your detention tonight. Is that true?"

"Yes, Professor, that's true." Harry tried to think about breathing normally to keep his calm.

"In that case, please come with me. We need to talk to the Headmaster."

"Certainly, Professor. If you don't mind, I'd like to leave my library books with Hermione so I don't have to carry them everywhere." She nodded, the disapproving look not leaving her face. He put his three library books and Hermione's book on the table next to his friend. She gave him a look like "I told you so", so he smiled at her as if it was all going to be all right. Everyone else in the Common Room was staring at him, but for once, he did not mind. He was feeling defiant and was enjoying it.

Harry followed his head of house through the corridors. He used that time to try to clear his mind. He wished he had had time to practice

Occlumency at least once. He was about to find out if his theory that there was more going on than what he had been told about was true. If he was right, he would be able to push the limits at least a little. If he was wrong, he was about to go down in flames. But no matter what, he hoped to have more information before the night was over, at least if he could keep his emotions in check and his inner Slytherin working.

As he walked into the Headmaster's office, he was not surprised to find his Potions Professor there. That was unfortunate, as it would make controlling his emotions that much harder, but it could also make the evening more amusing too. Having already decided that his focus object was going to be the dark of his old cupboard, as that "nothingness" was easy to think about, he brought up the image and tried to think about that as much as possible.

"Mr. Potter, please have a seat," the Headmaster held out his hand towards one. McGonagall took another while Snape stood to the side. "I have been informed that you purposefully did not attend detention with Professor Snape. Is that true?"

"Yes sir." Snape silently sneered at Harry's answer.

"Why is that, Mr. Potter?" There was not twinkle in the old man's eyes now.

Knowing that he would get further if he was as respectful as possible, Harry said, "Because I no longer recognize Mr. Snape as a professor, therefore his demands for a detention are meaningless."

"Oh for the love of..."

"Severus!" Albus almost shouted before he went on in a normal voice. "Please hold your comments and questions for a few minutes." He turned back to the student. "Mr. Potter, I realize that you've been having some difficulties lately, but you can not arbitrarily make decisions like that."

"I'm aware that the decision is a bit sudden, Headmaster, but it is very logical and I have excellent reasons."

A sarcastic, "Do tell what illogic you have conceived this time," came from Snape.

"Severus, keep quiet or I shall have to ask you to leave as you are not helping matters." Dumbledore sighed. "Now, what are your reasons for doing this?"

"I have two main reasons with a number of causes. First, Mr. Snape is not a teacher, therefore I can't really learn anything from him."

"Would you please explain that, Mr. Potter?" Professor McGonagall asked before her sneering colleague could make another objection.

"Professor," he addressed his head of house, "if a student sabotages another student's work, would you consider that a problem?"

"Of course, the disruptor would be punished."

"And if two students had a disagreement in your classroom, would you work to find out what the problem really is, or would you just punish one of the students without asking any questions?"

"I would obviously investigate the problem before handing out any punishments."

"And," Harry continued, "if a student had a problem, would you help him or tell him read the book and take points away for asking a relevant question?"

"I would help him, but what does any of this have to do with your decision?"

"Have you ever threatened a student?"

"Never."

"Lastly, if a student was obviously injured, would you ignore the student or send her to the hospital wing?"

"The student would immediately be sent to Madam Pomfrey for the appropriate treatment. Mr. Potter, what are you getting at?" McGonagall asked.

"Professor, I respect you because you answered every question correctly. You obviously care for your students. You are a teacher. However, every single question I asked you, Mr. Snape did the exact opposite today. I can not respect a person as a teacher like that anymore. He is not a good role model and he does not know how to teach."

Snape jumped forward and pulled out his wand as he said, "Why you little..."

"Petrificus Totalus!"

As Snape fell, Harry moved his knee so it would not get hit and watched his ex-Potions teacher fall face first to the floor, stiff and unable to catch himself. He looked over and saw his head of house with her wand in her hand. With a smile, Harry said, "Thank you, Professor. I appreciate you saving me from his true character." Harry heard a sigh from the other side of the desk and saw the Headmaster pull his glasses off of his face and rub his eyes for a moment before putting them back on.

"Mr. Potter? Can you please tell us what happened today?" the Headmaster requested.

"Certainly, sir. However, if you have a Pensieve, I could show you and then you'd better understand."

"You know what a Pensieve is?" McGonagall asked.

"Yes, Professor. I saw one for the first time this afternoon. They're brilliant. I wished I had one."

Minerva McGonagall sighed. "Yes, wouldn't we all. They are fairly rare and usually quite expensive when you can find them. Albus, if you'll pull yours out, I think I would like to take Mr. Potter up on his

offer." As the Headmaster did that, she asked, "If I may, Mr. Potter, where did you see a Pensieve this afternoon?"

"Uh, when I talked to Professor Ferguson this afternoon," Harry said tentatively.

"From Beauxbatons?"

"Yes, Professor. She was very nice and quite knowledgeable. I think I learned more from her this afternoon in an hour than I have all of this year under Mr. Snape. I showed her some of my memories from his classes and she was amazed I hadn't blown up my cauldron this year because I hadn't really been taught anything." Harry noticed movement out of the corner of his eye and realized it was Snape shaking in fury on the floor, but he seemed to be unable to do anything else at the moment other than vibrate on the floor.

The Headmaster was ready for him. "Since you used one this afternoon, I assume you know how to put a memory in here?" Harry nodded. "Then please place today's memory so we can see it." Harry did so, and the Headmaster used his wand to start it up; the memory displayed itself above the Pensieve like a projector.

As the memory finished, Harry could tell his head of house was incensed. "Professors, may I show you one more memory?" And the Headmaster's nod, Harry returned the memory in the Pensieve to his head and pulled out another. "This is from my very first Potions class a little over four years ago." Albus played that one too.

"You can see that I've had this problem with him from the very beginning, and I don't know why. Given that he hates me, can't teach, doesn't respect me, and is basically against me, I hope you can see why I don't plan to ever go back to his class again," Harry said. "I am paying tuition to be taught, but I don't want to pay for that kind of teaching."

"But, you have to continue Potions," McGonagall told him.

"I plan to, Professor," Harry informed them. "I arranged to join the Beauxbatons students and let Professor Ferguson teach me for the

rest of the year." The two professors stared at him. "Also, Professor Maxime agreed to let me attend their History of Magic class since I don't think I've ever learned anything from Professor Binns, and I really would like to pass that OWL next year."

"But, you can't do that, Mr. Potter. It's not normal," Professor McGonagall exclaimed.

"So, my life has never been normal," Harry replied with a touch of heat. He decided to push a little harder and see what would happen. "I think it will be a good test to see if I like the Beauxbatons students."

"Why is that, Mr. Potter?"

"Well, I would have talked to Professor Karkaroff, but something about him bothers me. Also, I haven't noticed any girls here with them, while some of the French girls are kind of cute and I would like to date some day." Harry heard a chuckle/cough from the Headmaster. "So if all goes well there, and things continue to go badly here, I might transfer there next year."

"Mr. Potter, Harry ..." the Headmaster started before he had to stop and clear his throat. "You really don't need to do that. We can provide for you here just fine. It's where your parents wanted you to go, too."

"I wouldn't know, Headmaster. I have no indication from them at all, so from my point of view, it's all up to me."

"Your guardian would want you here."

"My aunt doesn't care if I live or die, so I can choose to go to school wherever I want."

"Mr. Potter!" Minerva McGonagall exclaimed.

"It's true, Professor. I have more memories of them saying that than you probably have hairs on your head," Harry told them matter-of-factly.

"While that may be true, Mr. Potter," Albus said, "your wizard guardian wants you to go to Hogwarts."

"Sirius? He's never told me that, but I suppose we should discuss it during the holidays."

"No, Harry, I mean me," the Headmaster told him. "I am your wizard guardian."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't recognize you as such. Or do you have something written from my parents indicating that which you've never shown me?" Harry wondered about this, and also wondered if he should write Gringotts about this. He had heard they handle some people's Wills.

"No, Harry, I don't have anything in writing from your parents, but I have always acted as your guardian; and it is in your best interest that I act as such."

Harry shrugged slightly. "I'm sorry, Headmaster, but this will be my decision, although I will listen to advice from Sirius. I don't know for sure that I will attend Beauxbatons next year, but I might. It all depends on how this year goes. I can tell you with certainty that I will not return to the Dursleys ever again."

Dumbledore instantly sat up straight. "I'm sorry, Harry, but I really must insist upon that."

"And why is that, Headmaster? Why can't I go live with Sirius as my parents wished?"

"Because living with your aunt is the safest place for you. You can not be harmed there," the old man explained.

Harry was annoyed at the Headmaster for ignoring the question about Sirius. "That is factually false, I've been physically and emotionally harmed there many times over; but you've avoided the main part of my question: why?"

"Harry, when you were little, I placed some very special blood wards there to protect you. You must return there every year to recharge them with your magic."

"Why? What do I need protection from?"

"I'd rather not get into that just yet; I'm not sure you're ready for that information."

"All right," Harry calmly said and Dumbledore looked relieved. "In that case, since I have no reason to stay there, I won't." Now Dumbledore looked alarmed again. "Professor, I've finally used the brains Hermione says I have and I've noticed that a number of things in my life don't add up, but they seem to indicate that I'm important or special for some reason. I've also noticed that every one of them has you in the story somewhere. Therefore, I believe you know the answers, just like you know why the blood wards are on my aunt's house. But since you won't tell me anything, I'll just have to do the best I can with what information I have. If you want different results, you'll have to tell me the truth about a number of things."

Albus did not answer him, though he was deep in thought.

Harry stood after a few moments of silence. "If you change your mind, please let me know. Good-night."

It was not until he was out in the corridor again heading towards the Tower that Harry took a very deep breath and blew it back out. He had been playing a very dangerous game and it appeared that he had actually won the first battle. He was under no illusion that the war was over though. He also had to admit that tweaking the Headmaster had been a lot of fun.

"Well, Albus are you going to explain it to me?" Minerva asked. Before she could do anything else, she saw a slight movement near her feet. Looking down, she realized the third professor was still down there. Standing and stepping backward, she unfroze the man.

The man sneered and started with, "What the bloody hell do you think you were doing to me?"

"Shut up and sit down, Severus." As he opened his mouth again, she pointed her wand at him again. "Don't even try it. I've been a fully qualified witch for more than twenty years before you were born. Besides, from what I saw in the Pensieve, I should hex you anyway. You have no business treating any student that way. The hatred and blatant favoritism was completely appalling. I do not blame Harry in his decision and I'm quite surprised he hasn't done it before now."

"Why do you think he picked now to do this, Minerva," Albus tiredly asked. He popped a lemon drop in his mouth as he thought about Harry.

The head of the lions sighed. "I think it's a combination of things: stress, he's hitting his rebellious phase that most teenagers go through, and as he said, he's starting to notice things, ask questions, and put it all together."

Albus sighed again. "I was really hoping to wait one more year before I had to tell him a number of things."

"Then don't tell him and make him do the right thing," Snape grumpily advised.

Dumbledore snorted. "Minerva, if I were to attempt that, how do you think Harry would react?"

McGonagall did not hesitate in her answer. "He would rebel more and do the exact opposite. If you pushed him hard enough, I would even guess he would run away over the summer. If you think about it, he basically did that at the end of his stay during the summer before last."

"I'm afraid I agree with that assessment." Albus considered the boy a little more. "Severus, I'm sorry, but you are to keep away from Harry as much as possible. You may no longer take points from him or give him detentions, though I will not tell him that. Also, all detentions you give for the rest of the year will be reviewed by me, as will anytime you remove more than ten points from any person in a single day. Consider yourself on probation."

"Headmaster?!"

"I'm sorry, Severus, but it's your own fault. If you can show me that you've become more fair and a better teacher, I'll take you off of probation. Good-night to both of you." Albus sighed yet again. He was doing a lot of sighing tonight. His last thought before he headed for his quarters was: What do you do with a rebellious teenager who was starting to understand he has power over you?

It was a little after eleven when Ron came back to the Gryffindor Tower. His clothes were slightly damp and he looked tired, but he did not appear to be covered in anything foul.

"Was Snape a git to you over detention?" Harry asked. He had been back long enough that he had already sent Hedwig off to Flourish and Blotts with an order for two books on Legilimency.

Ron shook his head. "Actually, as soon as I told him that you had declined to come, he took me to Filch and I had to scrub floors. So it wasn't too bad." He plopped himself into a chair near the fireplace. Harry and Hermione were on the couch reading. There were a few older students in the Common Room talking and laughing, but no one else was near by.

Hermione closed her book and put it away. "Tell us Harry, what are you doing and what happened when Professor McGonagall came and took you away."

"What?" Ron was confused.

Harry grinned. "Surely you didn't expect Professor Snarky to go back to his dungeons after he left you with Filch did you?"

"Professor Snarky?" Ron started to chuckle. "Oh, good one. I like that." Hermione had small smile on her face too.

"Yeah," Harry grinned. "I talked to Hermione for a few minutes after dinner, then I went to the library to get some books, and when I came back, Professor McGonagall was waiting for me. She took me to the Headmaster's office. Snape was there too." Harry proceeded to tell

them about the conversation there, which also explained some of his recent decisions.

"Wait," Hermione said, "you're going to stop going to Professor Snape's class and go to the Potions class with the Beauxbatons students?"

"Yep. I'll do History of Magic, or really their equivalent, with them too."

"Wow, that's cool..." Ron had a goofy grin on his face.

"Why's that?" Hermione asked coolly. Harry wondered if she was thinking about Ron and the Veela girl.

"No Snape. You are one lucky git, Harry. I wished I could do that, but Mum would kill me." Harry agreed with his friend's assessment.

Hermione looked at Harry and in a small voice asked, "Are you really planning on leaving here and not coming back next year?"

Even Harry could figure out what she was really asking. "I don't know, Hermione; it probably depends on what happens this year. I've finally noticed that there are a number of things happening around me that I can't explain and I don't like most of them. I want them to stop or else I want to know what's going on and why. My, uh, threat is the only way I know to find out what's happening. But you should know that if I do decide to change schools, I'd love to have you come with me -- both of you. I don't want to lose either of you."

The girl smiled. "Thank you, Harry." It was silent for a moment before she asked, "Harry? How would you do that? Aren't most of their lessons in French?"

Harry smiled. "Yes, but Madame Maxime said there is a spell which can help you with a basic understanding so you can learn the language very quickly. She said I probably wouldn't have any problems after the first month. She even invited me over a few weeks before school started to help out with that. Of course, that was before I decided to start classes with her next week, so I guess she'll do that for me on Monday."

"It sounds like she wants you to come over there."

"Yes, I had that feeling too," Harry agreed. "But you know, it was a different feel than with the Headmaster. With her, I felt like I knew where I stood. She wants me there because it would look good for the school, and also because she thinks she can help me. With Dumbledore, I think he wants to help me, but it can be hard to tell at times because I think he's hiding something very important from me. I guess I felt like Madame Maxime was being more open with me."

Harry yawned. "Oh well, other than some different classes, my strange life goes on. I'm going to bed. Good-night." Ron followed him and Hermione went to her room.

The next couple of weeks went well for Harry. His potions class was hard, but much of that was due to his having to make up work Snape should have taught them over the last few years. Hermione was interested in his new classes and eagerly absorbed any new information from Harry.

Harry found his History of Magic course to be much more French oriented, but Madame Maxime was an interesting teacher and usually lectured about topics that affected the entire Wizarding world. She also rarely discussed goblins, for which Harry was thankful. He also found it interesting that Madame Maxime taught a class. When he had asked, she had explained that she was only doing so on the trip so as not to have to bring as many teachers. Therefore, only Madame Maxime, Professor Ferguson, and Professor LeMoure had come from the French school.

The translation spell worked quite well on Harry and he could converse with all of the students, though some words still escaped him. It only took a few days for the Beauxbatons students to get used to him being there. He also talked with Fleur a little and found she was now a little nicer to him. Apparently, taking classes at her school had raised her estimation of him.

The day of the first task, Harry went to the preparation tent with the other champions. Again, Rita Skeeter was present, but having dealt with her once before, he was now ready for her. No matter what she did, Harry ignored her. Once he even started practicing spells, and he

made sure a Stinging hex went her way and hit near her. He was not foolish enough to actually hex her, even though he wanted to do just that. As luck would have it, he drew the Hungarian Horntail and he was to go last. So he sat down to wait and plan.

Hearing his name called, Harry stood and went out to the arena. Stories from his childhood school about the old Roman gladiators came to mind. There was the huge dragon with several eggs at her feet, along with the golden egg he was supposed to retrieve. Surprisingly, he was not that nervous, but then his plan did not call for anything to get nervous about. Pulling his wand out, he pointed it at the pile of eggs and cast "Accio Golden Egg!" He was not surprised to see nothing happen. It was the obvious thing to try; therefore, they would have prevented that.

Looking up, he saw a smirk on the judges's faces. Casting a Sonorous on himself, he announced, "Well, that failed so I'm done. You can tabulate my score now."

The judges's expressions now turned to shock and everyone quieted down. Bagman was the first to recover. "Mr. Potter, you can't be done, you have yet to complete the task."

"I am done," Harry argued with his amplified voice. "You said I was required to participate. I have done that by making an attempt to complete the task. It was merely my bad luck you anticipated my attempt and prevented that. It's obvious not every person can complete every task. What if I had gotten so hurt I could not continue?"

There were murmurings now, not only from the judges, but from the students too. Everyone had wanted to see what Harry could do.

Harry now addressed the crowd. "To the other students. While Cedric is the Hogwarts champion and we should all support him, I'll give my place up now for anyone who wants it. Who wants to fight a dragon? Come on down and you can be my proxy. If you win all three tasks, you can even have all of the prize money. You only have to fight a dragon, and the other two tasks, which I think we can assume will be

harder than this." The students talked among themselves, but they also looked at the dragon. No one seemed keen to take him up on the offer while the judges looked at each other trying to determine if that was possible.

"Mr. Potter," Bagman continued. "You can not have a proxy either. You must try to complete the task."

"I did try to complete the task, but apparently there is an Anti-Summoning charm on the egg and I haven't been taught enough in school to do anything else." Hagrid had told him dragons were on the grounds, and Professor Moody had discussed using his broom to fly and get past the dragon. While Harry had thought that might work, he had no desire to abandon his overall plan.

Dumbledore seemed to look embarrassed, but he finally spoke up. "I guess the task is complete for this participant. Judges, show your scores please." Every judge gave him a zero, to which he smiled and walked out of the arena.

Back in the Common Room, a number of people started giving him grief about his choice to give up. Lee Jordan even went so far as to tell Harry he should not be a Gryffindor because he had no courage.

Harry turned at that point and shouted, "SHUT UP! ALL OF YOU!" When the room quieted, he went on forcefully, although not shouting. "I did not enter myself in this tournament. I did not want to be down there fighting a dragon for a sack of money. If a friend was dying or in peril? Fine, I'd find a way to kill the dragon. But there's no need to face a dragon for some stupid tournament. And how dare any of you call me a coward!" He looked at Lee. "I made an invitation for anyone to come down and do the task, have the fame and the glory along with the money, but none of you volunteered. So I don't want to hear any of your complaints. Like I said earlier, Cedric is the Hogwarts champion, support him." His tirade over, he stomped over to the stairs to go to his room for some peace and quiet. "Hypocrites," he muttered as he went up the stairs. His slamming of the his dorm room door was clearly heard by the shocked students in the quiet Common Room below.

It took Hermione a half hour to convince Ron to go up after him, and another ten minutes for Ron to get Harry to come down to dinner. Ron patted him on the back and Hermione gave him a hug. They got a number of looks from everyone at dinner, but no one said a thing to him. In fact, other than a few snide comments from Malfoy, no one said anything bad to him at all, and Harry was happy about that. At first, the only interesting thing that happened was he was pulled aside by the judges the next evening. Professor Dumbledore seemed to be the spokesman. "Mr. Potter, because you did not complete the first task, you can not have the extra golden egg which would give you a clue about the second task. Therefore, you will have to begin the task unprepared, unlike the other participants."

Harry just smiled. "That's all right, Professor; I'll deal with the task when it happens. Is there anything else I need to know?" he asked calmly.

"No, Mr. Potter, that's all."

Continuing with his calm smile, he turned and left.

"What is he playing at?" Ludo Bagman asked.

Dumbledore was not sure why Bagman looked worried. "I have no idea, but I suspect we'll find out." Looking at the other judges, he saw smiles on Madame Maxime and Karkaroff's faces. That was easy to figure out, they felt their contestants had a much better chance now.

November turned into December and life went on. At the end of first week of December, the next interesting event happened to Harry. At the end of his Transfiguration class, Professor McGonagall had an announcement.

"Class, on the evening of the 25th, we will have the traditional Yule Ball that accompanies the Triwizard Tournament. Fourth years and above are allowed to go. You may invite someone from a lower year if you wish. While you do not have to have date to attend the Ball, you will find it more enjoyable if you do have one." The bell rang to end the class. "You are dismissed, except for Mr. Potter."

With a sigh, Harry waited for everyone else to leave. When it was just the two of them, Harry asked, "You wanted to talk to me, Professor?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter, there are a couple of things we should discuss. As a Triwizard champion, you are required to attend the Ball, and you need a partner because you have to open the dancing after dinner."

"A partner?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter, a dancing partner, a date. Be sure to get one and I would suggest you do it as soon as possible. You do not want to disgrace Hogwarts."

"I'm afraid it's too late for that, Professor. I believe that already happened when my name came out of the goblet of fire; but I will find a date for the Ball."

She sighed before she softly went on. "I'm very sorry you got pulled into this, Mr. Potter; this should not have happened to you. Do you know what you're going to do since you don't have an egg to help you with clues for the next task?"

Harry shrugged. "Obviously, I don't know exactly what to do, but I have a general plan. I guess I need to develop a plan to find a date to the Ball too."

"That would be a good idea. I heard about your speech to the house after the first task. I don't agree with your non-participation, but I do understand and applaud your thinking it through, as well as your support for Mr. Diggory. Be careful, Mr. Potter."

For the rest of the day, and especially that evening, Harry could not help but notice all the twittering from the girls in the corridors and in the Great Hall. It really set him on edge. Between that and his need for a date, he decided to deal with the problem head on and just get it all over with.

After dinner, he looked around the Common Room and saw everyone he was looking for. With a deep breath to steel himself, Harry walked

over to the stairs to the boys dorm rooms and stood on the third step so he would have some extra height. In a loud voice, he called out, "My I have your attention please? If you would be so kind, I'd like all the third and fourth year girls to come over here please. I need to talk to you for just a minute."

Harry watched them Hermione, Lavender, and Parvati, as well as Ginny, Mandy, Allison, and Cynthia come over and stand in front of him. He came down to the first step. "Ladies, I have a problem and I need some help. Professor McGonagall told me today that I have to go to the Ball, and that I have to have a date. My date and I must dance the first dance. Besides that, I really don't care whether I go to the Ball or not, so after I've fulfilled my obligation, I don't know how long I'll stay at the Ball, although my date can stay as long as she likes. So you can see that I might be the worst Yule Ball date ever, especially since I can't dance." He noticed some confused looks on the girls in front of him as they tried to puzzle his speech out. He also noticed that everyone in the Common Room was watching and listening to him, not just the girls in front of him. He should have thought about that before, but too late now.

"Given all of that, do any of you want to go to the Ball with me?" Harry looked at them, not sure what he was going to do if more than one volunteered. After a few seconds, he saw Ginny raise her hand. "You do?"

Ginny smiled and nodded. "Sure, Harry. If I don't go with an older student, I can't go."

"OK, if you're fine with everything I said, you have a date to the Ball -- congratulations." He stepped down and shook her hand. She blushed slightly but shook back. As the other girls walked away, he lowered his voice. "Despite what I said, I'll try to make it nice for you, but there are no guarantees. I felt like I had to say what the worst was so there were no unrealistic expectations placed on me."

Ginny chuckled. "I understand. I'll do my best to help you like it, and I'll even help you learn to dance."

Now Harry chuckled. "It's a deal, Ginny."

At the end of his next Transfiguration class, Professor McGonagall again held Harry back. "Mr. Potter, why did you use that method to get a date for the Ball? I understood you practically auctioned yourself off."

"Do you hear about everything in the Common Room, Professor?"

"Of course not, but when students make announcements and speeches, they do tend to get back to me. Now, answer my question please."

"Well Professor, as you know, I really don't want to be in the Tournament, and I shouldn't be in the Tournament; and truthfully, I don't even want to go to the Ball. In fact, every boy in my dorm room, with the exception of Seamus, dreads finding a date, so I don't think I'm unusual. Girls are nice to look at, but I don't really want to date now, maybe next year. So that was the only way I could think of to get a date quickly."

McGonagall sighed. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Your attitude is quite normal for a fourteen year-old boy. Very well; head on to your next class." As he left, she shook her head and wondered how many other surprises he was going to have for her this year.

As Harry entered the Great Hall for the Yule Ball with Ginny on his arm, he was very surprised. There at the Head Table, where he and the other champions and judges were to sit, was none other than Percy Weasley. According to him, he was filling in for his boss, Barty Crouch. Harry mostly kept his mouth shut and just listened; however, Ginny seemed to have an agenda. It seemed that whenever Percy said something, Ginny would make a comment. Her comments seemed innocent at first hearing, but with some thought looking for double meanings, Harry realized she was skewering Percy. The boy was almost continually red faced, and Dumbledore seemed to be highly amused. Harry's regard for his date rose several pegs.

When dinner ended, it was time for dancing. As required, he escorted Ginny to the dance floor, along with Cedric and Cho Chang, Viktor and Hermione, and Fleur and Roger Davies.

"Don't worry, Harry," Ginny quietly told him. "Just dance like you did in practice. After the first few seconds, no one will be watching you anyway." That probably was not quite true, but it did seem to help Harry's nerves.

As the first song ended, they kept dancing for the second song too. "So, do you like dancing now?" she asked him.

Harry grinned at her. "Do you want an honest answer?" She nodded as they continued to move around the dance floor. "I sort of do, but I think the only reason is because I have you with me."

Ginny blushed madly and almost tripped. "Harry, I ..." She did not know quite what to say.

"Anyone can see that you're very pretty when you dress up like this, as opposed to just normal pretty when you're not." Ginny raised an eyebrow at that, but did not say anything. "You were really funny at the dinner table; I like your sense of humor. You're also a good dancer and a good teacher. I think that makes you a nice person to be around, so yes, I like dancing with you."

Ginny still was not sure what to say. Was he flirting with her, or did he actually like her?

By the end of the fourth song, they sat down for a few minutes with some punch. "Are you glad you came, Harry?"

He looked at her and cocked his head slightly. "Yes, I think I am. I may not leave early after all."

"Wow, I've taught Harry Potter something new that he likes. I should mark this on my calendar."

Harry joined her in a chuckle. "Wonders never cease. Are you glad you came with me? Have I been a bad date yet?"

"Of course I'm glad. You've been a good date, but the night is young so you have plenty of time to be a bad date," she teased.

Whatever Harry was about to say was stopped when another boy came over. "May I borrow Miss Weasley for a dance?"

Harry looked up to see a Ravenclaw there, Michael Corner, he thought. He looked at Ginny to see what she wanted and she nodded. "As long as you treat her well," Harry said. Michael held out his hand and helped her up, and out they went onto the dance floor.

It was interesting to watch Ginny. She seemed so at ease with everything. Harry again realized how pretty she was when she was made up like this. He had not been joking that she was normally pretty; he had noticed her, but she was extra pretty tonight. She was Ron's little sister, though that did not matter much to him and Ron had not given him any problems for taking her to the Ball. What did matter was her sense of humor and her intelligence. In many ways, she reminded him of her twin brothers, or at least a variation of them.

As the song ended, so did his pondering of his date. Corner brought her back and Harry rose and pulled her back out onto the dance floor. "Still having fun?" he asked her.

"Yes, but then I'm a girl and girls are supposed to like Balls," she told him with a soft laugh that bordered on a giggle but did not quite make it.

"And I'm a guy, so I'm not allowed to like the Ball," he teased her back. After another moment, he had worked up his courage to ask her another question. "Ginny, can I ask you a serious question?"

"Sure, Harry. I'll answer almost anything as I owe you."

"You owe me? I don't understand."

Ginny seemed to struggle with an answer. "Can we stop and go outside and sit down for a few minutes? This may be hard for me to answer while we're dancing."

"All right." Harry did not understand, but he decided to give her the chance to explain. They could have gone out into the Rose Garden, but it was a bit cool for Ginny's dress, so they found a bench in the

hallway that was secluded. They sat down turned towards one another, knees touching.

"I owe a debt for what you did for me two years ago," she told him very seriously. "There are some things I can't do for you now, but I'll do anything reasonable for you. You gave me my life back."

Harry was not sure what to say. "I've heard the term Wizard's Debt before, are you saying you owe me something like that?"

"Yes, Harry, I do."

"Ginny, you don't. I saved you because it was the right thing to do, not because I wanted you to owe me something, whatever a Wizard's Debt entails."

She played with a ribbon on her dress for a moment. "It's not a formal debt, it's more like a tradition but stronger; it's quite serious. Like I said, I'll do anything reasonable for you -- once."

"I don't know what to say. I don't think I'll ever hold you to that, but I'll keep it in mind just in case I run across a basilisk that needs slaying." Ginny chuckled with him, the mood again a bit lighter at that seemingly impossible occurrence.

"What is your serious question, Harry? I think we got side-tracked."

"My question? Oh, right. I, uh, I was noticing back in the other room what a nice person you are. You've got a great sense of humor, you're fun-loving, and you seem to be smart -- maybe as smart as Hermione." Ginny blushed at his praise. "So why don't we know one another better? It seems like we barely talked to one another over the summer."

Ginny again blushed. "I think I'd rather talk about the basilisk than this."

"Huh? Surely this isn't that hard of a question." Or at least Harry did not think it should be that hard.

"Ok, it's not hard, just embarrassing. Can't you see my face?" She looked up at him and he was smiling at her. "All right, let's try this. What was I like around you two years ago?"

Harry ran his fingers through his hair as he thought about that. Ginny was almost mesmerized by that. "I seem to recall you being somewhat shy back then."

She rolled her eyes. "That's putting it mildly. Harry, I was completely and hopelessly shy around you. I had this huge, and very unrealistic I might add, crush on you. I couldn't say anything with you in the same room without squeaking."

"You're doing pretty well right now," he pointed out.

"Thank you, I've had to work very hard to get this far, and I still find myself blushing around you for no reason." Or at least for reasons I refuse to name, she thought.

"Hmm, interesting. Do you think we could be friends now?"

A part of Ginny's heart soared and dared to hope, the rest of her heart was not sure what he really meant. She decided to listen to the majority for now. "What do you mean? I thought we were friends, at least as much as we can be since we're in different classes."

"You have a point, but I still think we could be closer friends, sort of like Hermione and I are. Would you like to do that?"

She smiled. "Sure, Harry, I'd like that." Harry looked at her for a minute, and she could tell he was thinking something through very carefully.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" Harry asked.

Ginny almost fell off the bench. That was about the last thing she had expected him to say or ask. Still, her teasing nature could not be denied. "No. Are you asking?"

"Maybe, but I guess I don't really know yet. I told Professor McGonagall not too long ago that I wasn't ready to date yet, but maybe that was because I hadn't met the right person. Can we be friends for a little bit before I ask?"

This was so sudden, and yet it was thrilling for Ginny. She had wanted to be his girlfriend for a long time, and now here she was "this close" to being there, all because she had volunteered to go on a "bad date" with him. "Maybe," she finally replied. "How long is a little bit? I don't want to be strung along forever."

Now Harry blushed. "Right, sorry. Oh, a month or two. I'd like us to hang around together and get to know one another first." He chuckled as he told her, "Sort of pre-dating."

Ginny grinned. "Sure, why not. I don't have anyone even trying to ask."

"Oh, well, that's good for me, then. We don't have to hurry and can make sure of things so we can know whether to get serious or not. So, now that we have that awkward part out of the way, how about we go back in and put some of your tutoring to work?" He stood and held out his hands for her and helped her up.

They went back to the Ball and onto the dance floor. They stayed until the end and the only time they did not dance was when Hermione came over and asked him to dance, so he gave Ginny to Viktor for one song. At the end of the Ball, they walked back to the Tower arm in arm.

At the bottom of the girl's stairs, Harry pulled her into a loose embrace. "Thank you for going with me, Ginny. I hope you had a wonderful time."

"I did. What started out as a sympathy date," she teased him before she got serious, "turned into a date that has given me a new good friend, and maybe more."

"Maybe more, but don't count your dragons before they hatch. Still, I'd like us to be better friends no matter what." Ginny agreed. "Why don't you start joining us for meals, at least some of them?"

"Thanks, Harry, I will. Maybe breakfast and dinner so I can sit with my friends during lunch."

"Sure, you shouldn't have to give up your friends."

She was glad he had said that.

"Good-night, Ginny, and thanks for coming." Harry did not feel comfortable kissing her like a boyfriend would, so he leaned down slightly and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. He saw her beam and that made him smile. Maybe he was ready to date, he thought to himself as he let her go and they each went up to their own dorm rooms. Maybe dating would not be so bad with the right girl...

The next morning, Ginny did join him for breakfast. "Hi, Ginny, have a seat." Harry patted the seat next to him and almost got his hand sat on.

"Thanks, Harry."

"What is she doing here?" Ron asked just before he shoved a lot of food into his mouth.

"I invited her. We decided to become better friends last night." Harry saw Hermione raise an eyebrow at them and Ginny mouthed something back. He guessed it was "later" or something like that. Ron looked confused, but he did not say anything else to them.

Harry took that as a good sign and started including her in the conversation as well by asking her questions. By the end of breakfast, Harry still thought she would be fun to have around.

Harry was up early on Valentine's Day writing a note. This was not a Valentine for Ginny; that was already taken care of. This was a note for Snuffles, otherwise known as his godfather. Harry realized he had a few problems in his life that he could not solve and needed help

with, or at the very least some good advice. He went to the owlery to send the request for a meeting with a school owl. He did not want to bring attention to his hidden godfather with a very obvious owl, and Hedwig had something more important to do today, he thought with a grin. That done, he went to breakfast.

Ron was already there eating, so Harry sat across from him, as was habit. A few minutes later, two girls come in and joined them. The red haired one sat next to him and the brunette sat next to Ron. "Good mornings" were exchanged.

They were well into breakfast when the morning owl deliveries came. A brown owl with white spots dropped something in front of the foursome. It only took a few seconds for everyone to realize it was bundle of white roses. Hermione grabbed the card on top to tilt it her way, then with a smile, she picked up the bundle and handed them across the table to Ginny.

Ginny took the roses and counted eleven, then found a twelfth one with a short stem attached to the ribbon that held them all together. She opened the card and read:

Roses are white,
Violets are blue,
I don't know what I'm doing,
But I do know I like you.
--Your Cautious Admirer

"What does it say and who's it from?" Ron asked.

"They're from an admirer, that's all it says. I wonder why there's one short one?" she pulled it out of the bundle and held it up.

"Hmm, I see a pin in the stem," Harry said, "so I'd guess you should wear it." He pulled the flower from her hand, the pin from the stem, and pinned it to her robes. "Lovely, someone has nice taste," he told her with a grin.

Ginny grinned and blushed slightly. "I better take these back to my room so I can put them in water." She beat a hasty retreat with a blush still on her face. During her journey, she wondered if Harry would ask her to be his girlfriend today. That would be so romantic.

"I wonder who would send her something like that?" Ron wondered.

Harry thought he had a protective look on his face, but Harry did not care. He could handle Ron if necessary.

"The obvious answer is someone who likes her, and he might even be nearby," Hermione said. She gave a quick glance at Harry, but he busied himself with the rest of his breakfast and did not see Ron glancing around trying to find someone who looked suspicious.

At lunch time, Ginny sat by Harry. "Well, this is a surprise," he told her.

She blushed slightly and pulled out an envelope and handed it to him. "I didn't know when else to give this to you."

Harry raised his eyebrow in question, but went ahead and took it from her. Opening it, he found a simple looking Valentine card. Inside, he read:

No special rhyme,
Just a simple message to tell you how much I like you,
To a special friend who's been there for me,
From a friend who will always be there for you.

Your Ginny

Ginny watched him read it, and if she did not know any better, she would have said he had tears in his eyes. Nothing leaked onto his cheeks, but his eyes seemed to get shinier. Without warning, she found herself enveloped in a hug and it felt nice. He had hugged her a few times since the Yule Ball, but they were very loose hugs. This was one of passion as she felt him hold her very tight, as if he never wanted to let go of her. In fact, she suspected the only reason he let go of her as soon as he did, was because of the noise of something being dropped on the table in front of them. Looking up, she saw a

medium-sized gray owl flying away. Letting go of Harry, she saw Hermione pick up the box and hand it to her; her friend did not even bother to read the name on the package.

"Why are you handing it to me?"

Hermione smiled. "Because Ginny, you got flowers this morning and none of the rest of us have any reason to be getting anything in the middle of the day."

"Yeah, why are you getting something and who's this one from?" her brother asked. While he had not said anything to Harry about the hug, he was looking at his friend a little differently.

Ginny looked at the card with her name on it. Inside, she read:

You're sweeter than this
--Your Cautious Admirer

"It's from my admirer again." Hermione looked triumphant in her guess while Ron looked confused. Ginny ignored them both and ripped the paper off the package. "Oh my, I think I'm in heaven..."

"What? It looks like a box of Honeydukes chocolate from here," Ron observed.

"This isn't just any chocolate, Ron, this is their best dark chocolate; the kind I can't normally get." It was out of her price range, but she had had a piece of it once and had desired more. She sneaked a glance at Harry and saw him looking at her with a blank face. Slowly, so as not to alert her brother and Hermione, she reached under the table and squeezed Harry's hand while she whispered, "Thank you." To his credit, Harry's expression never changed.

When dinnertime came, Ginny was practically bouncing with excitement. She had received two gifts already, one at each meal, so she was anticipating something during this meal too. She had also received a lot of comments from all the girls in her class about the rose she was wearing. They all found it as romantic as she did.

She and her special friend went to dinner as usual, walking closely together but not touching. Again she sat next to him, and again Harry acted as he normally did.

In some ways, Harry was a very frustrating boy. He was showing interest in her and they had spent a lot of free time over the last seven weeks talking. She had found out a number of things about him, some things she was sure that even Ron and Hermione did not know. On the other hand, they had done almost nothing like a boyfriend and girlfriend. They had not even kissed yet. He had held her hand a couple of times, once even in public, so she knew he was not ashamed of her. The problem seemed to be that he was just very cautious, as he had signed his notes today, about giving his heart out. She supposed she should be very happy about that because that made her feel very special that he would consider her worth it, but it was very frustrating.

They were nearing dessert when a pure white owl flew into the Great Hall and landed in front of Ginny. She recognized Hedwig immediately. The owl's arrival had captured everyone's attention, as owls almost never came at the evening meal, unless it was to deliver a howler. Hedwig stuck her leg out and let Ginny untie a thin and very rectangular box wrapped in shiny silver paper. After she had taken the package, Ginny gave Hedwig a piece of ham and petted the bird. "Thank you, Hedwig." The owl hooted and flew off.

Ginny felt like every eye in the room was on her now, and she was not far from being right. A few Slytherins and Professor Snape did not care, but other than that, she had everyone's attention. Opening the card on the box addressed to her, she read:

Maybe this is only representative, but you have mine anyway.
Please don't open this now, but meet me in room 17 at 7.
--Your Cautious Admirer

With a smile, she put the small, thin, long box and the card into a pocket in her robes.

"Aren't you going to open it?" Ron asked.

"I will later," Ginny replied. "I don't want to open it while everyone is looking at me." She saw Harry smile slightly.

Ron now looked at his best friend. "Harry? Why was Hedwig bringing Ginny a package?"

Harry saw a small smirk grace Hermione's face. Part of Harry wanted to groan at Ron's classic cluelessness. "Why don't you ask Hedwig?" He figured a stupid question deserved a stupid answer. It was not like Ron had not seen him and Ginny talking by themselves in the Common Room over the last month or so.

"That's stupid, I can't talk to an owl." The two girls started giggling and Harry smiled. "What?" No one answered him. "Come on Harry, why would Hedwig bring her something? Wait, you don't like Ginny, do you?"

"Would it matter to you if I did?" Harry asked him back nonchalantly as he dug into his dessert. He noticed that Ginny seemed to be amused at this based on her expression.

Ron did not answer for a moment, he appeared to be actually thinking about the question. "No, I guess not," he finally said. "I trust you with her. There are some here I wouldn't."

Harry could see that seemed to rile Ginny up a bit, and this did seem like an opportunity for fun. "Thank you, Ron, I'm glad you trust me with your sister. But tell me, why does anyone have to have your stamp of approval? Ginny seems very intelligent to me. Can't she make up her own mind?"

Hermione looked somewhat scared at that question, while Ginny's expression turned slightly smug. Harry considered that perhaps Hermione was afraid of what Ron was going to say, while Ginny approved of his question.

"Well, yeah, sure she can make up her own mind, but as her older brother I have to watch out for her," Ron explained. Hermione saw the expression on Ginny's face and scooted away from Ron.

Harry saw Ginny slowly reaching for her wand and decided that perhaps he should not have too much fun at his best friend's expense. He put his hand on Ginny's wrist to stop her as he said, "Ron, if you'll look at your sister right now, I think you'll see that Ginny does not agree with you on that attitude." He did see Ron's eyes open wide and a slightly fearful look come over Ron. "For your own good, I would suggest you rethink that position and then talk to Ginny about it -- not tonight, but sometime soon."

When Harry saw Ron nod, Harry gave Ginny's wrist a quick squeeze and then slowly removed his hand. "If you'll excuse me," he told them as he stood, "I believe I'll take a walk. I have some things to think about." It was fifteen before seven; he would have plenty of time for his rendezvous.

Ginny took a few minutes to finish off her pumpkin juice and cool down. She agreed with what Harry had just suggested and planned on having that conversation with her brother soon, if he did not suggest it first. "Hermione, I'll find you later in the Common Room. I'm going to go find a nice quiet place to open my gift." She saw Hermione smile; the circumstances were not lost on her intelligent friend.

After she left the Great Hall, Ginny headed up to a corridor she did not travel very often. She thought room seventeen was this way, but in truth, she was not sure. A few minutes before seven, she found that she had been right as she came to a closed door with that number. Hoping for the best, that tonight would be when she would finally have Harry for a boyfriend, she opened the door.

It was a fairly large room and empty except for one chair and a raven haired boy sitting in it. As she walked over to him, she saw him pull out his wand and cast a locking spell on the door and then put his wand back up.

"I'd like this to be an uninterrupted conversation," he told her. "Have a seat." He patted his legs with his hands.

Ginny smiled at that. It looked like they were getting more serious. Now she had a quandary: sit sideways or straddle. After a brief

moment, she decided to straddle his lap so it would be easier to look at him. Putting her hands on his shoulders, she coyly told him with a slight blush, "I'm all yours."

He chuckled and put his hands on her waist to help hold her in place. "Why don't you open your gift first? That's probably a good place to start."

"OK." Ginny was feeling pretty good. They had never sat like this with him before and she liked it. She also liked his hands on her waist holding her. Ripping the paper off, she saw a black velvet case. Opening that, she saw a gold necklace with a large gold heart with a script "G" in the middle. The heart pendant was a little over an inch across and fairly thick, which allowed the necklace chain to go through it, instead of having a loop on the top of the pendant like most pieces did. When she picked it up, she found that it was quite heavy. "Thank you, Harry. This is spectacular."

"Here, allow me," he told her and took the necklace from her. Undoing the clasp, he put it around her neck, and then fumbled for nearly a half minute before getting the clasp back together. He then slipped it under the top of her shirt so it was against her skin.

"That is really nice, but why did you get such a big pendant?"

He smiled at her. "Because it needs to be big to work properly. You see, it has a couple of wards on it, and its size gives the wards something to be anchored to, and to redirect the energy to, or so it was explained to me."

"What does it do?"

"It protects you from mental attacks. That includes those that are potion based, like love potions; spells are also blocked, like Legilimency; and other more personal magical attacks, like possession."

Ginny gasped. "You mean like, uh, ..."

"Yes," he answered, knowing the question. "That's why I got it really. I wanted to give you peace of mind."

"Thank you, Harry, though that does not really express my feelings. You've done so much today and all the gifts were so expensive."

Harry chuckled. "Ginny... I'm reasonably sure they did not cost as much as you may think, but even if they did, I think you're worth it." He got embarrassed now. "I'm not sure I meant to say that, but it is how I feel. You've become a pretty special friend, right up there with Hermione and Ron."

That made her happy, happy enough to lean forward and give him a hug. She was happier still when he returned the hug. In fact, he did not let go of her at all, not that she really minded.

"I hope this is OK with you, I think I can say this better if you aren't watching me."

Ginny giggled. "I don't mind, Harry. You can hold me like this all you want."

"You're very nice to hold, Ginny. I, uh, well, you can think of that heart as mine, if you want. I've really enjoyed spending time with you and getting to know you; and I want to keep doing that, if you want to."

"I do."

"That's good to hear, but I've got a problem."

Ginny started to pull back so she could see his face, but he held her tight so she could not. Realizing this was why he was holding her, she relaxed so as not to fight him.

"I want more, Ginny, but I don't know how; or maybe I don't feel like I can. But I don't want to lose you either."

"Why not, Harry? Why can't you?"

He sighed into her hair. "I don't know, that's the maddening part about it all. I've thought of little else for the last week in my free time, but I can't figure out what's stopping me. If I didn't know any better, I'd say I had spell on me that was preventing me from having a girlfriend. I want to ask you, but I can't seem to."

Ginny thought about that. She had heard of boys who would not commit, but this did not see like that. Then she had the thought that maybe he was just using her, but she instantly threw that idea out. Harry was not that kind of person and he was not asking for anything inappropriate. For some reason, he could not ask her that specific question. "What do you think we should do? Should we just act like boyfriend and girlfriend anyway?"

"I guess we could, but I'm not happy about that. Can we just continue on like we are now for a little while longer? I wrote a letter to Sirius this morning asking him to come here so we can talk. I'm hoping he'll have an answer."

She thought about that. Maybe it was a guy thing and Sirius could help him. "I suppose that would be OK for now. Maybe we can start holding hands while we wait?"

"Sure, I can do that. Thanks for being understanding." Harry let her go a little so he could kiss her lightly on the cheek before fully letting her go. He had gotten over the embarrassing part now.

"What is this place? I don't think I've ever been in this room before."

Harry smiled at her. "I haven't been in here since my first year. This was the room I found the Mirror of Erised. You know, that makes me wonder where that is and what I'd see in it now."

"Oh, I remember you telling me about that now. I wish I could see in it."

"Maybe we can ask Professor Dumbledore sometime. Well, shall we go back?"

"I suppose, but I really did like sitting in your lap, Harry."

He laughed. "I guess we can start doing that too. Hop up and we can go."

When they returned to the Gryffindor Tower, Hermione was not surprised to see them holding hands. However, Ron was.

"So, you weren't just having fun with me at dinner, were you? You really are dating."

"Not officially," Harry told him. "We're just getting a little friendlier while we consider it."

"I don't think so. If you're not really dating, you shouldn't be holding hands and things like that. It's not proper unless you're officially dating," Ron said very seriously.

Ginny pulled her wand out. "Ron, I'd hex you for that right now, but I don't want to ruin Harry's evening. I suggest you think very seriously about what I will allow you to do for me and we'll talk about it tomorrow. Come on, Harry, let's play a game of chess. We can talk about Quidditch too."

"Hey, Ginny?" Hermione called as the couple started to walk a way. "What present did you get tonight?"

Ginny smiled. "I'll show you later so the git over there doesn't have a fit." Ron looked mad now, not that Ginny cared. She led Harry over to the House chess set and they spent the rest of the night playing very slowly with lots of talk and laughter. She thought it had been a wonderful Valentine's Day -- not perfect, but wonderful nevertheless. Ginny even got a very nice hug when she went to bed.

A week and a half later, Harry walked hand in hand with Ginny down to the lake with everyone else for the second task. It was quite chilly, so he was bundled up in a long cloak and scarf. Ginny was similarly dressed.

"Harry, what are you going to do since you don't know what you have to accomplish like the rest of the champions?" Hermione asked.

"More of the same," Harry said as he shrugged his indifference. "I'll do enough to participate, but I'm not taking the Tournament seriously. The only real question is how much I have to do to satisfy the requirement."

Ginny gave him a good luck hug and a kiss on the cheek as he went off to join the other champions. There, Ludo Bagman explained the task. They each had someone in the lake they had to rescue and they only had one hour to do it. For Harry, they had Ron at the bottom of the lake.

As Bagman told the contestants to get ready, Harry noticed the others strip out of their clothes down to swimming attire. He was not going to be doing that. It was cold enough dressed as he was in warm clothing. Instead, he looked around, especially along the shoreline, and finally spotted what he wanted. He had an idea, and now he thought he could do it.

There was one complication to his plan and that was the three Weasleys still on the shore. Therefore, he quickly walked over to Ginny before the task started. "Ginny, I'm going to do something that may look like I don't care about Ron, but I promise I do; you'll have to trust me. Can you please tell the twins the same thing? I don't want you or them to be surprised and get mad at me, and I don't want anyone to do something that will be regretted later."

"Are you sure, Harry?"

"Yes. If you want to, think of it as a prank on Dumbledore."

Ginny laughed. "OK, I'm sure my brothers will like that. You better get over there, the task is about to start."

Bagman started the timer and the other three champions dove into the water. Cedric and Fleur seem to have a bubble around their heads, while Viktor seemed to morph slightly as he dove in. Whatever, Harry thought.

He pulled out his wand and cast "Accio rowboat". The small craft skipped across the water towards him. He grabbed the front of the boat as it reached him. Carefully stepping in so he wouldn't get wet, he shoved off into the water. "Everyone behind me better move quickly!" he called as he wedged himself in the boat tightly. Looking back up, he noticed that a few people had not heeded his warning. To his good fortune, three of them were named Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. Pointing at the water behind the boat, Harry thought about the banishing charm. Instead of a single burst, he thought about a continuous banishing. With that in mind, he cast "Sendan!"

Water went flying backward and soaked Malfoy and his friends, along with a few others who had not moved; the boat shot forward. He had gone maybe a hundred yards when the boat stopped moving. Happy with the result, he cast the spell twice more. He was now pretty far out in the lake. Three times he cast "Accio Ron Weasley!" with his wand pointing to the bottom of the middle of the lake. After a few minutes of nothing happening, Harry turned the boat around and went back to the shore happy that this task was essentially over for him.

When he returned, he stepped out of the boat and walked up to the judges. "Well, my idea didn't work, I'm done."

Dumbledore looked at him. "Harry? Aren't you going to doing anything else to rescue Mr. Weasley?"

"I already tried something, Professor. Fourth years have not learned the necessary spells to do this, so I don't know what else to do. But I'm sure it doesn't matter since you, Headmaster, put Ron down there, I'll assume you can bring him back up. If not, I suspect Mrs. Weasley will be most upset with you for putting him down there." The Headmaster was not happy with that answer, but Harry knew nothing could be done to him as he had tried. Harry looked over at his friends and saw a smile on Ginny's face and outright laughter on the twin's faces. When no one else said anything, Harry left the judges and returned to his friends. The twins were quite pleased as they did see the whole thing as a prank.

Soon Fleur came back and Harry knew that Dumbledore would have to bring two of the hostages, as he thought of them, up. While they

were waiting, Harry had an inspiration and called for Dobby. Happily, Dobby came. After greeting the elf, Harry asked the elf to bring a tray of hot chocolates for him and his friends to drink while they waited; Dobby was happy to comply. As they sipped their drinks, they started talking about the task.

"Harry, I can't believe you're doing this to the Headmaster," Hermione told him.

"Hermione, don't think of me doing it to the Headmaster, think of me doing it to the Tournament."

"I think it's funny," Ginny said. "I mean it's like you're trying to finish the Tournament with a zero. The best part is that you're not getting hurt."

"No, the best part is," started Fred.

"The look on Dumbledore's face. Way to go Harry," George congratulated him.

"Thanks, guys, I'm glad you're not mad at me for not trying to get Ron."

"No problem," Ginny told him. "We do appreciate the warning, and like you said, it's Dumbledore's fault he's down there and he will have to answer to Mum if the slightest problem happens."

When the task ended, each of the other three contestants received points, while Harry again got a zero. He was sort of surprised that Dumbledore did not give him at least one point for his attempt with the rowboat, but apparently Dumbledore was too upset with him to do that. It took another half hour before the Merpeople brought Fleur's little sister and Ron back up. Fortunately, Ron was not injured in anyway, other than sleeping through about twelve hours of his life.

The Saturday after the second task came and Harry got up very early, as he had told his friends he would and that they should not expect to find him for most of the day. Grabbing the Marauder's map and putting on his Invisibility Cloak, Harry made his way to the kitchens

undisturbed. It was not hard to get Dobby to put breakfast and lunch for four into his backpack.

With care, he sneaked out of the castle to the Whomping Willow. A soft whistle provoked a big black dog to reach up with his paw and press a knot on the tree. As the tree went limp, Harry hurried over to the hole in the ground and joined the dog. After taking his cloak off, he petted the dog and they walked through the tunnel to the inside of the Shrieking Shack.

The dog changed back into Sirius Black, who then hugged his godson. "Harry, it's good to see you. How are you doing?"

Harry opened his backpack up and pulled out the food so they could have breakfast. He would leave all the extra food with his godfather. "You know how it is, good and bad."

"Aye, and the bad is why you want to talk, isn't it?"

"Yes," Harry told him between bites.

"So tell me what's going on and what's bothering you. If I can help you, I will."

"You promise all of this stays between us?" Harry asked seriously.

"That bad?"

"Maybe, but that serious. I know some of this won't, uh, make some people happy, but I really need to know some things."

"Hmm," Sirius said and contemplated his godson as he ate some bacon. "I'll tell you what. I'll answer as best I can and not tell anyone, but I reserve the right not to answer all questions. There are some things that could be dangerous for you to know, though I doubt you will ask me about those."

"Good enough, I suppose." Harry debated as to which question he should start with. "I guess I'll start with the easy one first. Sirius, I've found this girl that I like..."

"Oh ho!" Sirius grinned at the young man.

"Shut it, I have a serious problem."

Sirius barely held in several retorts, all of which would have turned Harry quite red. "Sorry, Harry; you have to understand how much the four of us liked to tease each other about girls. Continue on."

"Her name is Ginny Weasley. She likes me and I've decided I like her, she's a really nice person. But, I can't ask her to be my girlfriend. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I just can't do it when I try. It's like there's a spell on me or something that stops me. I don't know what to do."

That surprised the man. "Hmm, the only thing I can think of that even comes close would be some sort of enchantment that would protect her if she was already betrothed to someone else. However, from what I know of the Weasleys, they would not betroth their daughter at a young age. If I had a wand, I could try a couple of spells to check you out."

"What? You don't have a wand?" Harry was amazed.

"No, the Ministry snapped it when I went to Azkaban."

"And why haven't you gotten another?" Harry wondered. Surely the Headmaster would have help his godfather get a replacement wand.

"Because it's damn hard to do when you're a wanted fugitive, Harry," Sirius said sarcastically.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Sirius, you're a wizard. Here, take my wand, do a few glamours to yourself and go get one. I'll wait."

The man sighed. "Harry, it's not that easy."

"Sure it is. Here," he dug into his clothes and pulled out his money pouch, "there's at least a hundred Galleons in my money bag. You can pay me back later, or not, I've got plenty. I'll hide under my cloak

while you Apparate to Knockturn Alley and get a wand. You should also get a few clothes."

Sirius looked at his godson and then started laughing. "With the right person to help you, maybe it is that easy." He waved the wand over himself and changed his face, his hair, and finally his clothes. "Back as fast as I can." He put a sealing ward over the shack entrance to protect Harry and then Apparated away.

Harry hid under his cloak and tried to take a nap, but he could not quite get comfortable enough for that. Half an hour later, a soft crack sounded in the shack and caused him to jump.

"Harry?"

The boy took the cloak off and looked at his godfather, who had a big bag in his hand. He also handed Harry's wand back to him. "Thanks, kiddo! That helps more than you can know. Here's the change. I owe you about ninety Galleons, but let's call it an even hundred for being such a nice guy."

"Whatever," Harry said and grinned. "Now, can you check for any spells on me?"

Sirius pulled out his new wand and cast four different spells. "Nope, nothing at all. Not even a tracking spell, which would not have surprised me. So, back to your problem, why do you feel you can't ask her?"

"I don't know. I can tell her that I want to ask her, and I can tell her that I can't. I don't understand how I can get so close but not do it."

"Very interesting. Let's try something else. I want you to close your eyes and think about Ginny for a moment." Sirius waited until Harry looked relaxed. "Now, I want you to think about asking her to be your girlfriend, but don't say anything to me. Just think about the question and let all of your thoughts and feelings swirl in your mind." He again allowed a short pause. "Now, try to sum all of that up into one word. What is the first word that comes to mind when you think of the question."

"Scared," Harry said without hesitation.

"You're scared?" Harry nodded. "All right, you have a fear. What's the fear? Rejection?"

Harry shook his head. "No, it's bigger," he whispered.

Sirius could see the struggle on the boy's face. "Loss?"

"Close, I'm lost. No, she's lost. She comes and then goes." Harry sounded like he was in a trance. Small beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. "She goes and I can't save her again."

"You almost lost her once?"

"Years ago in the Chamber, I barely saved her life and almost died." Harry continued to struggle. "Lost my parents too." Harry started to speak faster. "Almost lost you too. That's it! I'm afraid of her dying, people who I care about and get close to me usually die. I can't do that to her."

"Whoa, Harry. Let's not jump to conclusions here."

"But don't you see, that is the conclusion. Ron almost got killed in my first year by the giant chess pieces. Hermione barely escaped death from a Troll. Oh no, I gotta leave so my troubles won't hurt them."

"Harry, stop! STOP!" Harry finally shut up so Sirius could talk. "There, now let's talk about this calmly and rationally. I know we live in a dangerous world and we all experience loss. I can tell you a number of stories about losing family and close friends, but that does not mean I'm the cause of all the death and injury. And think of someone like Dumbledore who's really old, think about how much loss he's seen. Again, I'll tell you that any of his friends who have had problems are not Dumbledore's fault. Bad stuff happens to people merely because they live. Do you understand that?"

Harry thought carefully. "Maybe. I was around all of those times, but I guess you have a point. It was my idea to go after the Philosopher's

Stone, but it could have been anyone of us who was on the chess piece that got hurt."

"Exactly."

"And Hermione got in trouble with the troll because she ran off on her own."

"Right. You went to save her," Sirius agreed.

"And with my parents, I was only one year old..."

"Right, you could barely crawl and talk. And as for me, that definitely wasn't your fault. So now that you understand, let me take it all one step further. When you isolate yourself, things get worse. You need friends with you to help make you strong, to cover each other's backs. So don't push your friends away. You'll only hurt yourself and cause them worry."

"So I need to ask Ginny?"

"Yes! Having a good girlfriend is very beneficial. Is she understanding? Does talking to her helps you understand things?" Harry nodded. "Will she stand by you when things get rough?" Harry nodded again. "Does she make life better?" Again Harry nodded. "Then don't delay, Harry my boy. When you get back this evening, take her someplace private, I can suggest several good closets for that, hold her in your arms, and ask her to officially be your girlfriend. It's really easy. I think your magic was sub-consciously preventing you from asking her."

"Right," Harry agreed. "I can do that. If I can stand up to Professor McGonagall and the Headmaster about not taking Potions, then I can do this easily."

"You did what?!" Sirius asked amazed, so Harry took a half hour to tell that story. By the time Harry was done, Sirius had fallen on the floor and was literally rolling in laughter. "Oh man, I would have loved to have seen Snape's face when Minerva took the body bind off. I

have to hand it to you, Harry. That was done with style, truly worthy of a Marauder."

"Thanks!"

"Well, we've wandered far off our path. You said you had a second problem?"

Harry sighed. "I do. Not only do I need advice, I'm going to need help."

Sirius waited patiently while Harry thought about how to start this one.

"OK, I've noticed some things in my life that don't make sense, things I don't like either, things I want to change or at least understand. First, I've noticed that I'm treated very differently. When it was time for my Hogwarts letter, it was mailed to me and then Hagrid came and got me when the Dursleys wouldn't let me respond. But I've talked to Hermione, who is Muggleborn, and Neville, who also has no parents though he does live with his Gran, and neither of them had anything like my experience. Sure Neville had his Gran to explain things, but Professor McGonagall went to Hermione's house to talk to her parents and explain things. Hagrid is my friend and I know he wouldn't hurt anyone unless he was protecting himself, but he's scary looking to people who don't know him, especially Muggles."

"Hmm, I'm not sure what the school policy is on that, Harry, but I can see what you're pointing to. Go on with the other things you've noticed."

"I also don't understand why I have to stay with the Dursleys. They've mistreated me for as long as I can remember. I can even remember having to go to the hospital because Uncle Vernon broke my arm when he got angry with me, and I did not want to leave the hospital because those strangers were so much nicer than my relatives." That got Sirius's attention. "I've told the Headmaster this and yet he keeps sending me back. When I asked him why, the only thing I could get out of him was it's because there are some blood wards there to protect me, but that's obviously not true considering how much the

Dursleys, all three of them, have hurt me. When I ask why about that, he won't give me any answers."

"Interesting, this is the first I've heard of those blood wards, and I have no idea what they would protect you from. Hmm, I think I may have to pay a little visit to your relatives. Anything else Harry?"

"Related to that, now that I know that I have a live, honest-to-goodness, godfather, I'd like to go live with you in the summer, but Dumbledore tried to forbid it. He even said he was my wizard guardian, but he also couldn't produce anything from my parents stating that he was."

Sirius thought about that. "You know, now that I have a wand, I believe I'll be able to help you out now; I couldn't before since I was always on the run, literally. Let me think about that. As for Albus being your wizard guardian, I suppose he does that with all students who don't have wizard parents or guardians."

"But what gives him the right? What did my parents want? I've never even seen their will." Harry was starting to get worked up. "Hell, my Muggleborn friend knew more about my parents than I did when I started school. Who was I supposed to have gone to? Surely my parents stated that."

"Aye, they did. I was first on the list and there were a handful of names after mine; none of them were Dursley either."

Harry swore.

Sirius laughed so Harry glared at him. "Harry, be glad I'm not a professor or you'd be in detention for that combination of words. But I can see you're serious about this, so I will investigate it for you. Anything else?"

"Yes. Bad things, and I mean very bad things, keep happening to me. In my first year, I had to face Voldemort twice and I killed Professor Quirrell. In my second year, I had to face a young but still powerful version of Voldemort housed in a diary, in addition to fighting a sixty-foot long basilisk. You know what happened my third year with all the

Dementors and Wormtail. And now this year, someone has entered my name in the Triwizard Tournament, and no matter how much everyone thinks Professor Moody is crazy, I think I believe him when he says that someone did it to get me killed. Worse yet, I think there's at least one more something I should be adding to this whole list, but it keeps just eluding my grasp."

"That's some list, Harry. I can see why you're looking at it. That's a lot of coincidences to happen to one person."

"You don't know why?" Harry asked.

"No; sorry, kiddo."

"Damn! I was hoping you'd see a pattern. The only thing I can come up with is that Professor Dumbledore seems to be involved in each of those stories in some way. Usually indirectly, but for some he's a main character. So I know he must know more than he's telling me." Harry sighed in his frustration.

"Interesting observation. You know, Harry, you're missing two other people who are in every one of your problems, though sometimes very indirectly."

"Who?"

"Yourself for one," Sirius grinned and then laughed at Harry's face. "Second, Voldemort plays a part. You know, fear of Voldemort was why your parents went into hiding just after your first birthday. I never found out the full reason, just that it had something to do with Voldemort, who made Wormtail turn traitor, and then His Snakiness killed your parents before trying to kill you."

Harry's face lit. "That's it! That was what I was trying to think of. How many other students have had Voldemort personally come after them and their family? And Dumbledore was involved in that to, as he came at the end and took me away to the Dursleys."

"Yes, a very interesting set of circumstances indeed. I shall have to give this some thought. I doubt I'll come to any earth-shattering

conclusions, but you never know. Can I share all of this with Remus Lupin? He was usually the brains in the group."

Harry considered that. "If you'll make him promise not to share it with anyone else. I really don't want this in any form to get back to the Headmaster. I really meant it when I said I'm not going back to the Dursleys, and I am seriously considering going to Beauxbatons next year if anything else bad happens this year."

Sirius nodded. "I understand, Harry. I don't think Remus will have any trouble promising before I tell him. I have no problem with you coming to live with me once I get my house set up, and I really don't care what school you go to, as long as it's a good one. Well, at least we got one of your problems solved and we can work on the other one over the next few months. Why don't you dig some lunch out of that bag and we can eat while you tell me about the second task."

Harry pulled out the sandwiches while Harry told about his un-champion behavior. Sirius almost choked when he started laughing about Dumbledore's reaction to Harry's solution to the task. They also spent several hours just talking and getting to know one another. Harry was glad he had asked his godfather to come to visit him. Ginny was bored and a little worried. She had all of her homework that was due Monday done, so she was only doodling. Ginny was also wondering where Harry was. It would be time for dinner soon and he still had not shown up.

From literally nowhere, a small piece of parchment appeared in her lap. It said, "Room 17". Without hesitation, she picked her things up to take them to her room. This could only mean one thing, or rather one person.

"Where are you going? Hermione asked. She was working on a Potions essay.

"I need to walk and get some exercise before dinner. I'll see you there."

"Want some company?" her friend asked.

"No, thanks; I'll see you at dinner." She put her book bag on her bed and then quickly walked to room seventeen. She was walking fast enough that someone else had trouble keeping silent while matching her pace. That made her smile. She opened the door to the room, paused for a few extra seconds to let someone else go in first, then she went in and closed the door behind her.

Ginny had barely made it in when Harry appeared, the Invisibility Cloak now visible on the floor, and his arms went around her. "Hi, Harry," she told him with a smile and wrapped her arms around him. "Miss me?" she asked teasingly.

"Yes!" He told her with a big smile.

She laughed. "I take it Sirius helped you?"

"Yes. He helped me understand some things, then he told me to ask you to be my girlfriend. So Ginny? Will you be my girlfriend?"

Ginny pushed herself up and kissed Harry on the lips for the first time. It was a long, leisurely kiss, one that promised so much more in the future.

"I should take that for a yes?" Harry asked breathlessly.

"Uh-huh," Ginny murmured before she kissed him again. They barely made it to the Great Hall before the food was cleared away.

March, April, and May went fairly well for Harry. He and Ginny still spent a lot of time talking, though some snogging sessions found their way into the couple's schedule. Harry was also enjoying his two classes with the Beauxbatons professors and students. With a decent teacher, Potions was almost a joy, though it would never be as fun as his Defense class. He was also now fluent in French.

On the day of the third task, Professor McGonagall told him he had some "family" to see him and he could spend the day with them. She led him to the Trophy Room where he found Mrs. Weasley and Bill waiting for him.

"Harry dear, how are you?" Mrs. Weasley gave him a big hug. Bill shook his hand.

"I'm fine Mrs. Weasley."

"How's Ginny? She tells me in her letters that she's seeing a lot of you these days," the woman told him with a smile.

Harry blushed. "She's doing very well. We've had a lot of very long talks and have enjoyed getting to know one another." He tried not to think about any of their times in the broom closets here and there so his blush would not get him into more trouble.

"That's good to hear," the woman told him. They were slowly walking down the main corridor of the castle. "Harry? How do you feel about the Tournament? Are you doing fine there too?"

"Certainly, it's no trouble at all, at least if you don't count that stupid reporter and her articles." Harry had continued to avoid Rita Skeeter, not that it helped a lot. The reporter seemed to have no trouble inventing nasty quotes about him out of thin air.

"I quite agree with you on that woman," Mrs. Weasley said. "So Harry, are you going to try to do something on this last task?"

Harry thought that was a strange question from her. In looking at Bill, he noticed a puzzled look on Bill's face too. He decided he needed to be careful here. "Since I'm only a fourth year, I have no hope of winning, so I don't see why it matters." He watched her carefully to see if he could find a reason why she was asking this.

"Of course it matters, Harry. You want everyone to think well of you. You shouldn't abandon the task and do nothing. What would people think of you?"

"Well, all of my friends think I'm doing the right thing by trying to be safe. Or are you saying that it's OK for me to get hurt doing this?" Harry asked. The trap was set; he hoped he wouldn't have to spring it.

"Of course not, Harry. I want you to be safe just like I do all of my children. But you know Professor Dumbledore would make sure you wouldn't get hurt in this," she told him with confidence.

Harry mentally sighed, sorry that he was going to have to do this anyway. "Mrs. Weasley? Did Professor Dumbledore ask your permission to put Ron in a coma and then put him at the bottom of the lake for the second task, especially when he already knew I would be unable to get Ron out?"

"He did what?!" the woman almost screamed.

"You're saying the Headmaster involved Ron in the second task?" Bill confirmed.

"Yes. Each champion had a person to rescue at the bottom of the lake. They were taken the night before the task. Best as I can tell, the only way to rescue the person was with seventh year spells. So as you can see, I had no hope of completing the task. Therefore, I made a token effort, as is required of me. The first task was similar. The Conjunctivitis Curse and the major Fire Shield spells are also seventh year spells; again, I had no hope."

"Charlie told me what you were up against and I wouldn't have even wanted to attempt it," Bill told him.

Mrs. Weasley was in partial shock as she worked through what had happened to her youngest son. "He lied to me," she muttered.

It was not hard for Harry to guess what she was talking about. "I suspect he would tell you he had only left out part of the story, which he has done to me in the past. Did he ask you to talk to me about the third task?" Harry was certain they were discussing the same "he", but by using only the pronoun, Harry could try to get information out of Mrs. Weasley without being wrong about the person's identity.

Mrs. Weasley huffed. "That old coot, just wait until I see him again." She let out an angry noise before she turned to Harry. "Yes, he asked me to try to convince you to really compete."

Harry was not surprised. "How does it feel to be manipulated like that?" Both of the Weasleys looked shocked at hearing that. "Yeah, it's not very nice to think about, is it? I have several mysteries in my life that I can't figure out and every one of them has Professor Dumbledore in them somewhere. I think he knows the answers, but he won't tell me."

"But Harry," Molly protested, "adults can't tell their children everything. They're not ready to deal with it."

Harry wanted to groan. He was so close to getting her to see his point, but her motherly instincts were stopping her. "Mrs. Weasley, if I were five I'd understand; but I'm almost fifteen. I know I still have a lot to learn, but I know more than the average fifteen year-old."

"I disagree..."

"Mrs. Weasley? How many times have you stared death in the face? How many times have you been one wrong decision away from dying a sudden death?"

"None, but that doesn't matter..."

"Yes it does," Harry said forcefully. "I can tell you don't like to think about it, but please do for just a few minutes. I have stared down death three times since I started school here, and that does not count the dragon I avoided in the tournament. I've even killed someone, Mrs. Weasley." She gasped and started to move to hug him, but he stepped away which shocked and stopped her. "So can you, for just a moment, please admit that there is something special happening to me, that I need to know what all is going on around me? Can you admit that I need information if I'm going to stay safe? Can you see that by having faced death multiple times, I know more about life than the average person my age? Can you please treat me like an adult, or at least like Bill?" He saw a smile on the oldest Weasley boy's face.

"I don't know, Harry," she finally told him. "I've always seen you as another child of mine."

"But even children grow up; look at the man beside you," Harry told her.

"I know, Harry, but even then, I don't like it."

Now Harry sighed out loud. "I suppose I can see that, but you're going to have to get used to the fact that I'm not a normal boy." He thought of next year and decided to prime the pump for that while they were discussing growing up.

"Mrs. Weasley? How would you like to save some money on Ron and Ginny's education and let them learn more about another culture?"

She got a suspicious look on her face. "What are you talking about?"

"I haven't fully decided yet, but I've been thinking about going to Beauxbatons Academy next year." Molly eyebrows went to the top of her head. "I don't know that I will, but I have looked into it because of several bad professors and a Headmaster who won't tell me anything. I've been taking a couple of classes with the Beauxbatons Students and professors, and I like them. It's also five hundred Galleons a year cheaper per student."

"So you're thinking of transferring?"

"Yes. I'd also like to take a few friends with me, and I think Ron and Ginny would like it there. I've learned more about Potions this year with Professor Ferguson than I did in my other three years combined with Snape." Harry waited to see what she would say.

Molly thought about it for nearly a full minute. "I don't know what to say."

"I understand, but you don't need to decide right now. However, I would be grateful if you would think about it. I really would like to take a few friends with me," he told her with a grin.

That seemed to end the hard discussions and the rest of the day was spent telling stories from both Molly's and Bill's days at Hogwarts. They seemed to be more carefree days, days in which the people did

not find themselves unknowing entered into potentially deadly tournaments.

The third task had started. Cedric, who had been in the lead point-wise, had entered the maze of shrubbery over five minutes ago. Viktor and Fleur had run in a little less than a minute after the leader. At the five and half minute mark, Ludo Bagman told Harry to go.

Harry entered the maze and at the T-intersection about ten yards in, he stopped and pulled out his wand. Pointing it straight in front of him, which should have been where the center of the maze was, and hence the trophy, he cast "Accio Triwizard Cup". After a few second of nothing happening, he turned around and went back to the entrance of the maze where everyone could see him and sat down just barely inside. Not really having anything else to do, he pulled out a pack of Exploding Snap cards, and began to play the solitaire version of the game.

Dumbledore and Bagman come up to him, but it was the Headmaster that asked the question. "Harry, what are you doing?"

Harry looked up from his cards as he was about to lay them out. "As I've told you every other time, I'm trying to survive something I never should have been in to begin with."

Bagman looked really upset at Harry and Dumbledore looked resigned. Looking over at the other judges, he saw that Percy was ignoring him, Karkaroff was wearing a huge smile, and Madame Maxime gave him a small smile and a nod.

Harry had talked to the Headmistress about the tournament and his non-participant stance. She had told him that she admired him for what he was doing. Knowing one's limits and not exceeding them to avoid serious injury or death was a mature thing to do. While he felt she was being truthful with him, he also felt she appreciated it because it gave Fleur a better chance to win. Because that was so obvious, he did not feel the same way towards her as he would of Dumbledore telling him the same thing.

Harry was starting on his sixth game almost an hour later when the hedges started to fall apart, leaves and twigs flying and falling from the top down, as if someone had taken a huge set of shears and started trimming the hedges an inch at a time. Harry grabbed his cards and came out of the entrance to the maze. After putting his cards back into an inner pocket, he dusted the leaves off of himself. Ginny joined him a minute later and picked some more leaves out of his hair.

When the shrubbery had disappeared, Cedric Diggory could be seen standing in the center of the maze holding the Trophy. The Hogwarts students cheered, Harry was as happy for Cedric as everyone else.

The other two champions could be seen. Krum was weakly fighting what appeared to be a Sireen, but it was not acting like a real Sireen, so Harry thought it must have been a Boggart. Fleur was seen talking to a Sphinx. There were a number of other things visible, like a giant spider as well as a full grown blast-ended Skewt. Harry was very glad not to have gone any further into the maze.

Krum and Fleur were rescued from their monsters and brought over for the official awarding of the Triwizard Cup. Cedric happily accepted it and it was obvious that his parents were very proud of him. Harry was amused when Cedric even gave him credit for helping him to win, that Harry had been a good sport by not distracting anyone and by supporting him the entire time.

Harry was glad it was all over and he could be normal now, or as normal as he ever was, he considered. As he was about to walk back to the castle for the after-tournament party, Professor Moody put a hand on his shoulder.

"Potter, I'd like a word with you in private for a moment."

"It can't wait until tomorrow, Professor?" He really wanted to go to the party; a Butterbeer sounded great right now and he knew there would be some there.

"I won't keep you long, Potter. I want to talk to you over there about the Tournament," he said in his gruff voice. He had pointed behind him.

Harry noticed that the old man had kept his hand on Harry's shoulder. That and the insistence seemed odd to him. "OK, let me give my girlfriend a hug good-bye." He turned to Ginny, who was looking at him strangely, and hugged her. "Get McGonagall and rescue me, something's wrong," he whispered into her ear. As he pulled back, he said out loud, "See you at the party in a few minutes."

He turned and started walking slowly with the Professor, whom he noticed had them heading towards the front gates. Moody was asking about what he had seen during the three tasks, and what people had said. Harry imagined it was a lot like what an Auror would do during an investigation. He hoped Ginny understood and hurried; he was quite sure he could not take Moody down on his own.

Ginny watched her boyfriend walk away with their Defense professor. She was confused by the man's actions and she had to agree with her boyfriend: something was not right here.

After they had walked away, she turned and scanned the crowd walking towards the castle. There, not more than fifty yards from her was Professor McGonagall. She started walking quickly at first, then after she passed some people, she started running.

"Professor McGonagall!" she called as she reached the side of her head of house. "Something is wrong, very wrong, and you need to help."

The usually stern looking woman looked at her. "What's wrong, Miss Weasley?"

"It's Professor Moody. He said he has to talk to Harry right now and he's leading him towards the front gate. Professor Moody was acting funny too, funny even for him."

Mentally McGonagall laughed at the last part, though she did not show it. She stopped her walk back to the castle and looked

backwards. In the half moon, she could barely see two figures walking away from the castle. She could not tell who they were, but one was definitely taller than the other. She had to admit, Ginny made a good case for this being "funny".

"Please, Professor," Ginny begged. "Harry thinks something's wrong, but he needs help to figure out what it is."

"Very well, let's go see what's happening." The two women started briskly walking after the two figures in the distance. They were walking almost twice as fast as the ones in the lead, so it did not take long for them to get near.

As they neared the lake, Harry heard the voice he had been waiting for. "Alastor?"

Moody suddenly turned around and seemed to pull up a shield in front of him as he fired a Stunning Spell at the Deputy Headmistress. As the woman shot a spell back to defend herself, Harry quickly pulled out his wand and stunned Moody in the back. For all of his talk about "Constant Vigilance", Moody had forgotten about the boy behind him.

McGonagall came running over. "Harry, what were you doing?"

"I was trying to get an imposter captured. This didn't seem like the real Moody, because the real Moody wouldn't take me to someplace less safe," Harry reasoned.

"Maybe he's under the Imperius Curse or something then. Harry, take his wand." She tied the man on the ground up to be safe. If she was wrong, she knew Alastor would understand. With a flick of her wand, the unconscious Professor floated behind the other three as they made their way to the castle.

As they reached the doors to the castle, the Headmaster came out. "There you are, Minerva. What do you have?"

"I don't know, Albus." McGonagall slightly flustered; she did not like not knowing what was going on. "Mr. Potter claims Alastor was acting

strangely, even for him, and I think I'd have to agree. He was taking Harry towards the front gates as if to remove him from the school."

"I have to agree that would be most unusual," the old man said. Just then, the prisoner on the ground started going through mild convulsions. A few seconds later, the magical eye and the artificial leg fell off. The four onlookers were now staring at a much younger looking man. "Barty Crouch, Jr.! This is most interesting. Minerva, please find Severus and have him bring some Veritaserum to Moody's quarters. You should also probably get our Minister of Magic and bring him with you, but don't tell him who we found. Just tell him we have a problem that he needs to know about. I suspect we are about to find out some very interesting things."

The older woman left and the Headmaster turned to the two students. "I thank you, Mr. Potter, for your good deed this evening. I know the real Alastor Moody will thank you too when we find him. In the meantime, why don't the two of you go enjoy the party?"

"Will you tell us what you find out?" Harry asked.

"I'm sure I'll be able to tell you some of it. I don't want to make any promises before I find out what he knows though."

Harry started feeling incensed again. "If it's something that doesn't affect me, I understand. But if it affects me, even indirectly, I want to know. I can't make good decisions if I don't have enough information."

"We'll see, Harry. Enjoy the party," Dumbledore told them as he took the unconscious Death Eater into the castle.

As Harry readied to board the carriages to go to the Hogwarts Express to go home for the summer, he saw the real Alastor Moody overseeing things. The ex-Auror had indeed sought out Harry; they had had conversation after the Leaving Feast. Harry thought back to that time last night.

"Potter?" The Defense professor called out. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure, Professor," Harry had agreed and went to a nearby classroom.

Moody shut the door behind him. "Potter, I want to thank you for helping. Dumbledore told me that it was you who figured out Crouch was not me. Being imprisoned my own trunk and forced to give up my secrets, well, I thank you for rescuing me from that."

Harry thought the teacher wanted to say more, but could not quite bring himself too. "You're welcome, Professor."

The older man snorted. "Not much of a professor, was I?"

Harry shrugged, "Maybe not as yourself, but since the imposter had to be like you, I did learn a lot this year. Professor, could you tell me what he said? No one will tell me what happened, and I know it affects me."

Moody snorted. "It's hard to be vigilant when you don't know what to be on the look out for, isn't it?" Harry nodded. "Well, Potter, Crouch's plan had been to get you away from the castle. Once he had done that, he was going to take you to where Voldemort was in order to use you in some ritual to get the Dark Lord a new body." Harry was very surprised at that. "Unfortunately, by the time the information was obtained, and Albus had gotten past many nasty accusations against him by Fudge, no one was found at the location. So it's all speculation as far as Fudge is concerned."

"Except for one captured Death Eater who was supposed to be dead?"

A gruff laugh escaped the man. "Good point, Potter, except for him."

"Thank you for telling me this, Proffessor."

"My pleasure, Potter. Work hard and keep an eye open for trouble." With that said, the one-legged man had left.

Harry very grateful for the ex-Auror telling him the information, as he was grateful for not having been an unwilling participant in the Dark

Ritual. Moody was right, it was hard to be vigilant when you did not know what to be vigilant for.

That was in contrast to when Harry had talked to the Headmaster the morning after the capture. The Headmaster had told him nothing useful at all, other than it was Crouch Jr. who had put his name in the Goblet of Fire for some nefarious purpose, a purpose which was not named except to say that it would have benefited Voldemort.

On the train ride home, Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione secured a compartment just for themselves. Ginny sat very close to Harry and held his hand.

Ron seemed to sigh as if he had a depressing thought. "I really am going to have to get used to seeing you two like that, aren't I? These last few months weren't something temporary, were they?"

"Nope, I don't plan to let go of him," Ginny said with a bright smile on her face.

Harry looked pretty happy too. "Well, there is one way out of it for you Ron."

"What?"

"I think the abduction attempt by Crouch Jr. was one thing too many for me." His friends had been astounded when he had told them the story Moody had relayed. "So I'm going to transfer to Beauxbatons Academy for next year. I'd really like all three of you to go," he turned to look at his girlfriend, "especially you, but if you don't want to come, I'll understand."

Hermione was the first to answer. "I don't know, Harry. I really like Hogwarts and I'm not sure about the travel."

"Madame Maxime has promised me International Portkeys for me and my friends as needed," Harry told her. "Also consider that we'll get to go over early, probably just after Ginny's birthday, you'll become fluent in French, plus think about all the new cultural experiences." Hermione looked torn.

"I know why you want Ginny to go, but do you really think it would work out for me, Harry?" Ron asked.

"Sure. They have four Quidditch teams in the school over there too. We'll all help you adjust. Besides, if you don't go, you'll have to get a new chess partner while you're at school. Although, I suppose if seeing Ginny and I hold hands is too much for you, you should stay at Hogwarts," he teased his friend.

"You're right, I should go so I can watch over Ginny." At Ginny's changed expression, Ron quickly added, "Just teasing, Ginny, just teasing." He remembered their little conversation from a few months back very vividly. When they had finished their talk, Ron had fully agreed to leaving her alone unless she asked for help with a boy. Besides, he really did trust Harry with Ginny.

"Talk to your parents and send me an owl before the end of July," Harry told them. "I have to tell Madame Maxime by the first of August, and we'll have to tell Professor Dumbledore by then if we're not going to Hogwarts. Also, don't forget that it's five hundred Galleons cheaper than Hogwarts because of fewer government taxes."

"Well, I know I'm going," Ginny told him.

"I talked to your mum about it to help her start thinking about it, but have you heard a yes from her already?" Harry was surprised she had not shared that news yet.

"No, I haven't heard from her about it, but I've got to go so I can protect you from all the French witches," Ginny explained with a smile.

Harry leaned over and kissed her cheek. "As a last resort if she says no, you could tell her that you owe me a life debt and I want you to come as payment."

Ginny got a calculating look on her face. "That might work, but as you say, that would be a last resort." Ginny looked at Harry then back at Hermione and Ron. They looked comfortable, so she stood and

pulled on Harry's hand. "Come on Harry, let's go for a walk. There's something else we need to talk about."

Ron looked at Hermione after the door had closed. "They're not just going for a walk are they?"

Hermione dug out a book from her bag. "Probably not. I suspect they'll discuss Harry's living arrangements now that Sirius has a place. And I imagine they'll discuss other things."

"I just can't believe my little sister has a boyfriend and snogs," Ron complained. It was just unfair that she would do that before him, he thought.

"Hush, Ron. It's good for both of them to have a friend like that. Besides, I doubt anyone else would understand either of them."

"What do you mean?"

Hermione shook her head slightly at his cluelessness. "Ron, how many other boys are there for Ginny to get to know who can really understand what she went through in her first year? Who else has experience dealing with You-Know-Who? As for Harry, how many girls know You-Know-Who and have had to fight him like Ginny has? Those two have a special understanding, not to mention they're cute together." Hermione giggled as she opened next year's Ancient Runes book. Ron sighed and pulled out a Quidditch magazine.

Back in the baggage car, Harry held Ginny close, enjoying the feel of her body against his. "So are you really glad you're my girlfriend?"

"Yes, without a doubt. Why do you ask? I would think it would be obvious."

"I just want to make sure. I've found a girl who's a great friend and I don't want to lose her."

"Not bloody likely..."

Harry leaned down and kissed her. As they parted, Ginny giggled. "What? Was the kiss that bad?" he asked her.

Ginny giggled again. "No, you're a very nice kisser. I was just thinking that's one French thing you won't have to learn." She silenced his protests with another kiss.

He was definitely going to have to make sure she came to Beauxbatons with him.

end

A/N: During the beta editing portion of ch 5 of my story "Rogue", I had Harry ripping Albus "a new one" over the Headmaster not doing "the right thing" for Harry in various ways. One of the things I listed was Albus not pointing out to Harry that he did not have to be in danger during the Triwizard Tournament, that Harry could have done basically nothing, taken a zero for each score, and just be safe and survive. My excellent beta, wolfsscream, made the comment "Why didn't Harry do that himself?". And so this plot bunny was born. I hope you enjoyed it.

In case any one is wondering if I will make this into a series and continue the story, I do plan to, but I don't know when. Wait and see. :-